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Narcissus Revisited: Norman Mailer and the twentieth century avant-garde

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the American novelist Norman Mailer's relationship to the 20th century avant-garde. Mailer is often remembered as a pioneer in the new documentary modes of subjective non-fiction of the sixties. Looking beyond the decade's themes of fact and fiction, this thesis opens up Mailer's aesthetics in general to other areas of historical and theoretical enquiry, primarily art history and psychoanalysis. In doing so, it argues that Mailer's work represents a thoroughgoing aesthetic and political response to modernism in the arts, a response that in turn fuels a critical opposition to postmodern aesthetics.

Two key ideas are explored here. The first is narcissism. In the sixties, Mailer was an avatar of what Christopher Lasch called the "culture of narcissism". The self-advertising non-fiction was related to an emerging postmodern self-consciousness in the novel. Yet the myth of Narcissus has a longer history in the story of modernist aesthetics. Starting with the concept's early articulation by Freudian psychoanalysis, this thesis argues that narcissism was for Mailer central to human subjectivity in the 20th century. It was also a defining trait of technological modernity in the wake of the atom bomb and the Holocaust. Mailer, then, wasn't just concerned with the aesthetics of narcissism: he was also deeply concerned with its ethics. Its logic is key to almost every major theme of his work: technology, war, fascist charisma, sexuality, masculinity, criminality, politics, art, media and fame. This thesis will also examine how narcissism was related for Mailer to themes of trauma, violence, facing and recognition.

The second idea that informs this thesis is the theoretical question of "the real". A later generation of postmodernists thought that Mailer's initially radical work was excessively grounded in documentary and traditional literary realism. Yet while the question of realism was central for Mailer, he approached this question from a modernist standpoint. He identified with the modernist perspectivism of Picasso and his eclectic "attacks on reality", and brought this modernist humanism to a critical analysis of postmodernism. The postwar (and ongoing) debates about postmodern and realism in the novel connect in Mailer, I argue, to what Hal Foster calls the "return of the real" in the 20th century avant-garde. This thesis also links Mailer to psychoanalytical views on trauma and violence; anti-idealist philosophy in Bataille and Adorno; and later postmodern art historical engagements with realism and simulation. Mailer's view was that a hunger for the real was an effect of a desensitising (post)modernity.

While the key decade is the sixties, the study begins in 1948 with Mailer's first novel *The Naked and the Dead*, and ends at the height of the postmodern eighties. Drawing on a range of postmodern theory, this thesis argues that Mailer's fiction sought to confront postmodern reality without ceding to the absurdity of the postmodern novel. The thesis also traces Mailer's relationship to a range of contemporary art and visual culture, including Pop Art (and Warhol in particular), and avant-garde and postmodern cinema. This study also draws on a broad range of psychoanalytical, feminist and cultural theory to explore Mailer's often troubled relationship to narcissism, masculinity and sexuality. The thesis engages a complex history of feminist perspectives on Mailer, and argues that while feminist critique remains necessary for a reading of his work, it is not sufficient to account for his restless exploration of masculinity as a subject. In chapter 7, the thesis also discusses Mailer's much-criticised romantic fascination with black culture in the context of postcolonial politics.



## **Signed Declaration**

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Versions of chapter 1 and chapter 8 have been published elsewhere. Copies of these publications are included as an appendix to this thesis. Where I do not own the full copyright, I have obtained permission from the relevant publisher/copyright holder.

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## Introduction

How does Norman Mailer fit into the history of the postwar American avant-garde? This is the question that will be the central focus of this study. It is also a challenging question insofar as Mailer's primacy in that story, and in the broader history of the American novel, is no longer taken for granted. During the nineteen sixties, Mailer was a hotly disputed figure but a culturally central one, and his writing is still often critically measured against this very American mode of public celebrity. For many readers and critics, Mailer is best remembered as a pioneer in the new documentary modes of subjective non-fiction of the sixties, a decade where a hypersaturated American reality offered unique imaginative possibilities for novelists: the Kennedys, Vietnam, the moon landings, the battles with feminism. The New Journalism, in the standard reading of the period, was just one flank in a series of innovations in the arts (and perhaps in this context it was also the most formally conservative; certainly it was the most realist). The cultural eclecticism and aesthetic adventure of this new sensibility, as it was called, and its engagement with both the content and aesthetics of mass culture, was emblematic of early postmodernism's mixing of high and low, fact and fiction.<sup>1</sup>

Starting with *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), Mailer was also embracing a role as an avatar of what Christopher Lasch called the "culture of narcissism".<sup>2</sup> Mailer established a literary voice that was characteristically poised between forensic self-criticism and brazen self-advertisement. The culmination of this tendency in his work was *The Armies of the Night*, his non-fiction account of the 1968 anti-Vietnam march on the Pentagon. Deploying fictional techniques to write about actual historical events, Mailer was also writing about himself as if he were his own fictional creation. However, the short term expediency of this as a technique – and there are many uses of narcissism – ultimately led to Mailer being trapped in what he called the "sarcophagus"<sup>3</sup> of his image. His narcissistic persona is infamous in popular culture, where it became a common

subject of parody.<sup>4</sup> But it also provoked more antagonistic responses. After reading *The Armies of the Night*, David Foster Wallace wrote that he found Mailer “unutterably repulsive. I guess part of his whole charm is his knack for arousing strong reactions. Hitler had the same gift.”<sup>5</sup> Wallace’s allergic response to Mailer contains something of American culture’s puritan hostility to self-display. But Wallace also identifies a paradox: narcissism’s very power to alienate and attract also makes it effective as a form of provocation.

Wallace’s aversion to Mailer is in part a generational reaction to a mode of American literary masculinity. Wallace once included Mailer, along with Philip Roth and John Updike, in a list of the “Great Male Narcissists who’ve dominated postwar realist fiction”.<sup>6</sup> Wallace argues that it was precisely the masculine self-absorption of Mailer’s generation that repelled so many younger readers and writers. Partly, this was a legacy of the feminist critique of Mailer and other masculine writers of the era. But partly it also derived from a *post*-feminist and postmodernist self-consciousness about masculinity as a subject (arguably, Wallace is disguising his own apologetic investment in hip white masculinity). There is an unmistakable patricidal impulse at play here. Wallace is seeking to nullify and fix that generation of writers as sexually sclerotic and culturally unadapted relics of an imperial phase in American writing. The capital letters here function to connote *ugly masculinity*, a theme taken up in his short story collection *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* (1999). Ossified in their maleness, these writers were also for Wallace on the verge of obsolescence in their realism, whatever their residual commitments to postmodern forms.

Realism, like documentary, almost always has a vaguely pejorative meaning for Wallace, as it does for a number of later American postmodernists.<sup>7</sup> Jonathan Lethem, in a sympathetic but still self-conscious confession of his early infatuation with Mailer, sees narcissism and realism as traps that Mailer never really escaped. For all the while Mailer was embracing the avant-garde spirit of the sixties, he was being outflanked on all sides by more innovative and influential postmodern experiments in the novel:

In hindsight, Mailer looked in the late '50s to have become a radar detector for the onset of the postmodern novel — as he had for the postmodern cultural condition generally — in his declared topics, his appetite to engulf every dissident impulse and the whole atmosphere of paranoia and revelation that saturated the '60s, though he delivered barely any fiction to reflect it, in his predictions in essays like “Superman Comes to the Supermarket”; in his self-annihilating advocacy of Burroughs’s *Naked Lunch*; in his desperate, dashed-off forays in *Why Are We in Vietnam?* and *An American Dream*, and so on. The reason Mailer couldn’t arrive at a satisfactory postmodern style (even as he saw his one firm achievement in *The Naked and the Dead* mummified by ironic treatments of his war by Heller, Vonnegut, and Pynchon) was because postmodernism as an art practice extended from modernism, to which Mailer had never authentically responded in the first place. This might have been Mailer’s dirty secret: He was still back with James T. Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan* in the soul of his aesthetics, even as the rest of his intelligence raced madly downfield, sometimes sprinting decades past his contemporaries.<sup>8</sup>

This is a sophisticated variant of a common reading of Mailer’s work.<sup>9</sup> The argument runs roughly as follows: after his first book, the naturalistic war novel *The Naked and the Dead* (1948), Mailer’s most influential work was largely his non-fiction. For Lethem, Mailer’s currently “unfashionably preening brand of self-consciousness” had a hidden disavowed influence on other postmodern forms of mythmaking in fictions by Wallace and David Eggers.<sup>10</sup> But his imaginative *fiction*, through all its formal mutations and its imaginative efforts to grapple with accelerated postmodern reality, remained essentially stuck in the aesthetic assumptions of the depression era realists who influenced his first novel.

The study will counter this account of Mailer’s relationship to the postmodern novel by offering an alternative art-historical reading of both his “realism” and his “narcissism”. Mailer’s avant-gardism was never, as Lethem suggests, as formally radical or as aesthetically estranged in its world-building as writers like Burroughs or JG Ballard, the creators of hybrid imaginative spaces of global culture such as *Interzone* or *Vermilion Sands*. *An American Dream* (1965), for all its hyperrealism and phantasmagoric



imagery, remains very much grounded in American actuality. But if indeed Mailer did fail to achieve a “satisfactory postmodern style” (a question that will remain for now moot), this claim cannot be grounded on the faulty premise that he never really wrestled sufficiently with the legacies of modernism. In this study, I will make the contrary argument: that the evolution of Mailer’s creative work can *only* be fully understood as part of a thoroughgoing aesthetic and political response to modernism in the arts, a response that in turn fuels a critical opposition to postmodern aesthetics. And instead of playing off the fiction against the non-fiction (an ultimately exhausted theme in Mailer criticism), this study will open up Mailer’s *aesthetics in general* to other areas of historical and theoretical enquiry, primarily art history and psychoanalysis.

Here I see Mailer’s exploration of narcissism as a vital historical link. Mailer certainly was a major influence on a strand of postmodern self-consciousness in fiction: other examples are Philip Roth in *The Counterlife* (1986) and *Operation Shylock* (1993); Martin Amis in *Money* (1985); and Bret Easton Ellis’ metafictional horror tale *Lunar Park* (2005). But the myth of Narcissus has a longer history in the story of modernist aesthetics, and it is to this history that I see Mailer offering a distinctive and serious response. As David Lomas argues, “It would be hard to think of a myth with a richer tradition in literature and art”.<sup>11</sup> There is more to narcissism in Mailer than the self-advertisements of the non-fiction. This reputation for narcissism was not of course entirely undeserved. A commonplace argument about Mailer is that he tipped the balance too often in the direction of self-display, and that McLuhan age literary stardom was ultimately a distraction from fiction. There is clearly some sense to this, just as there is no denying the masculine egoism that often runs through his life and work. Yet these are largely biographical or quasi-biographical objections, not aesthetic ones. An examination of his fiction and miscellaneous works shows that the theme of narcissism goes back far deeper, and appears in widely different aesthetic contexts than that of *The Armies of the Night*. If we follow these threads, a very different picture of Mailer emerges.

To understand this, we need to look to the roots of narcissism in twentieth century thought. This primarily involves a turn to its early articulations by Freudian psychoanalysis. Mailer's relationship to Freud is complex and often critical. His work up to "The White Negro" was broadly Freudian, as well as Marxist, in its politics, which Mailer took from the radical psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich. But if Mailer perceived a radical potential of the Freudian unconscious, he became increasingly disenchanted by Freud's scientism and also by the social conformism of psychoanalysis in American postwar society. This study is not primarily about Mailer's relationship to Freudian discourse in this strict historicist sense. But it does argue that Mailer's ideas and artistic evolution can only be understood as a response to the broader Freudian century.

First, a brief outline of Freud's key ideas about narcissism, primarily his 1914 essay "On Narcissism". Freud's innovation in this essay is to see narcissism not as a myth or a mere clinical category but as a general trait of human subjectivity. Narcissism was nothing less than a psychological dimension of the biological life force, "the libidinal complement to the egoism of the instinct of self-preservation, a measure of which may justifiably be attributed to every living creature".<sup>12</sup> While certain kinds of secondary narcissism could be pathological, Freud argued, a certain degree of primary narcissism is necessary for human survival and ego-formation. Freud time and time again attributes extraordinary civilizational and evolutionary effects not just to narcissism itself, but the fascination it exerts on other people. Narcissism is not just subjective but inter-subjective: adults want to protect babies, Freud claims, because they see in them an example of the self-love and dependency they have sacrificed to *become* an adult.<sup>13</sup> Freud also saw the narcissist as the classic type of the artist, starting with his earlier study of Leonardo (which is also where Freud first writes about narcissism as an aspect of homosexuality).<sup>14</sup> But, writing at the beginning of the first world war, Freud was also to come to see a traumatic and even destructive potential in narcissism. In "Mourning and Melancholia", Freud began to see a melancholic withdrawal of the self as a key effect of trauma.<sup>15</sup> This, Freud felt, was similar to a regression to a state of narcissism. And

in later works like *Civilization and its Discontents*, written as fascism was beginning to rise in Europe, he was to see a “narcissism of minor differences” as a key ingredient of the tendency towards aggression and warfare.<sup>16</sup>

Mailer’s work emerges out of this historical and civilizational background, and in particular from the destructions of World War II. As I argue in chapter 1, his first novel *The Naked and the Dead* was politically concerned with Cold War anxieties about totalitarianism. But what was to become clear with his second fiction *Barbary Shore* (1951), and most explicitly in the essay “The White Negro” (1957), Mailer’s major preoccupation was with tracing the traumatic effects of modernity in the wake of the Holocaust and the atom bomb. The opening sentence of “The White Negro”, widely regarded as the primal imaginative core of Mailer’s work, speaks to this idea:

Probably, we will never be able to determine the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years. For the first time in civilized history, perhaps for the first time in all of history, we have been forced to live with the suppressed knowledge that the smallest facets of our personality or the most minor projection of our ideas, or indeed the absence of ideas and the absence of personality could mean equally well that we might still be doomed to die as a cipher in some vast statistical operation in which our teeth would be counted, and our hair would be saved, but our death itself would be unknown, unhonoured, and unremarked, a death which could not follow with dignity as a possible consequence to serious actions we have chosen, but rather a death by *deus ex machina* in a gas chamber or a radioactive city; and so if in the midst of civilization – that civilization founded upon the Faustian urge to dominate nature by mastering time, mastering the links of social cause and effect – in the middle of an economic civilization founded upon the confidence that time could indeed be subjected to our will, our psyche was subjected itself to the intolerable anxiety that death being causeless, life was causeless as well, and time deprived of cause and effect had come to a stop.<sup>17</sup>

My claim here is that Mailer’s primal reworking of the Faust myth is, in civilizational terms, an iteration of the Narcissus myth. This is supported by a postscript to the

essay, where Mailer links the two mythologies. For Mailer, the revolutionary twentieth century was “conscious, Faustian, and vain, enacted in the name of the proletariat but more likely an expression of the scientific narcissism we inherited from the nineteenth century”.<sup>18</sup> Leaving aside for now the Cold War politics, what Mailer is beginning to perceive is a narcissistic destructiveness in technological modernity and its deadening processes of abstraction. Modern civilization, Mailer claims, is characterised by a narcissistic drive to domination and mastery. The result of that abstraction for Mailer is a hunger for real experience whose outlet in American society is psychopathic violence.

The key part of the logic for this study is Mailer’s emphasis on the real as a domain of experience. Slavoj Žižek, drawing on the work of the philosopher Alain Badiou, writes:

The ultimate and defining experience of the 20th century was the direct experience of the real as distinct from everyday social reality — the real, in its extreme violence, is the price to be paid for peeling off the deceiving layers of reality.

Recalling the trenches of the first world war, Ernst Jünger celebrated face-to-face combat as the authentic intersubjective encounter: authenticity resides in the act of violent transgression, whether in the form of an encounter with the Lacanian real — the thing Antigone confronts when she violates the order of the city — or of Bataillean excess.<sup>19</sup>

Mailer is precisely interested in his work from “The White Negro” on with what Badiou calls the “passion of the real”, with the ethics of the face-to-face encounter. The logic runs roughly as follows: one result of technological and capitalist modernity is that human agents are increasingly separated from acts of violence, which in Mailer’s view *enables* acts of mass destruction (one example he gives, which we shall look at closely in chapter 3, is the Italian fascist bombing raids in Ethiopia in the thirties). The “face-to-face” encounter is precisely then the opposite of the kinds of sadistic power that are enabled by abstraction. However, what does this face-to-face encounter actually entail? In the most notorious formulation of “The White Negro”, Mailer speculates that

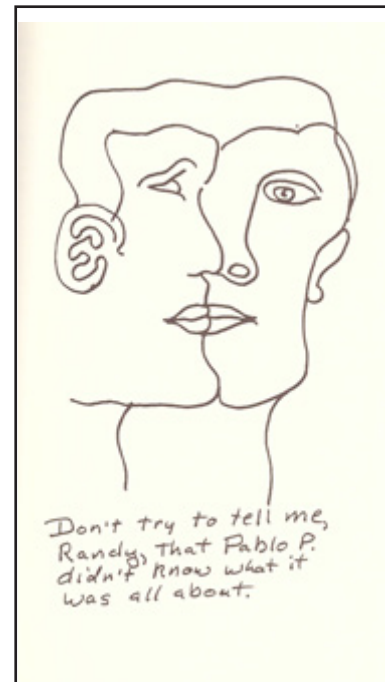
“individual acts of violence are always to be preferred to the collective violence of the state”.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, this logic also has an arguable connection to the two great disasters of Mailer’s life: his stabbing of his second wife Adele Morales during a psychotic breakdown; and his role in the release of the killer Jack Henry Abbot. This logic cannot be satisfactorily unpacked in this introduction. This study will therefore aim to explore the various permutations and paradoxes of this logic, measuring its consequences alongside its aesthetic implications for a reading of Mailer’s fiction.

One aspect of this logic is that has not perhaps been fully explored by critics is Mailer’s interest in the *traumatic*, accidental encounter. Facing the real is Mailer’s key metaphor for the encounter with art. The theme first emerges early, in the apprentice work *A Transit to Narcissus* (1944, but unpublished except in facsimile). *A Transit to Narcissus* predates what Mailer later identified as the formative experiences of his career as a writer: his war experience, and the early unexpected fame after the publication of *The Naked and the Dead*. Yet narcissism already appears here as an aspect of *traumatic* identity. The novel’s protagonist Paul Scarr is the prototype for the wounded narrators that populate Mailer’s more mature fiction, most notably Mickey Lovett of *Barbary Shore* (1951) and Stephen Rojack in *An American Dream* (1965). Scarr, an orderly in a mental hospital, just as Mailer had briefly been during a summer break while at Harvard, is preoccupied with an idealist desire to find masculine achievement through a war (the key background here is the Spanish Civil War), as well as a private sense of insufficiency and uncertainty about his identity. The book contains in embryo ideas and motifs that will later be central to Mailer’s work: mirroring, projection, divided identity, homosexual anxiety and the gap between private and public selves. In a key scene, Scarr detects “no quick or startling recognition of his own face in the mirror before him”.<sup>21</sup> Facing, mirror, recognition: this short sentence fragment contains no less than three of the key words that will be explored in the chapters that follow. The face in Mailer is the locus of identity, and, as with Narcissus, the mirror is the place where we both recognise and *misrecognise* ourselves.<sup>22</sup> This theme in *A Transit to Narcissus* dovetails in the bar scene with

an interest in sculptural form, figured by an allusion to the French sculptor Maillol.<sup>23</sup>

This germinal interest in the face and artistic form later reappears in Mailer's lifelong fascination with the works of Picasso. Take for example the informal series of line drawings that Mailer occasionally experimented with, some of which are published in *Modest Gifts* (2003). Almost all of these are frontal sketches of faces, in most cases little more than doodles, sometimes no more than dots. These are not important or distinguished works by any standards, but their witty informality presents in a visual

form themes explored in Mailer's more developed fiction. One captioned work is especially interesting: "Don't tell me, Randy, that Pablo P., didn't know what it was all about".<sup>24</sup> Here, Mailer sketches out an image of narcissistic doubling (is it one face or two?) which also calls on the homoerotic potential of narcissism. There is something unmistakably camp in the caption to this image, which highlights but also discharges the drawing's androgynous eroticism. Mailer's interest in androgyny is often overlooked, partly because of his reputation for masculine excess, and partly because in his work masculinity is more often than not in revolt



**Fig. 1. From *Modest Gifts* (2003)**

against the feminine. But sexual fluidity, a type of formal ambiguity, is one of his constant, if ambivalent, themes: gender is always changing shape in Mailer in ways that are often formative, and often threatening, for masculine identity. This preoccupation with shifting and ambiguous form is central to Mailer's interest in Picasso, and to his exploration of ideas of identity and sexual personae more generally.

Mailer's interest in Picasso is also an identification with modernist ideals of male creativity and artistic ambition: Narcissus is here a heroic explorer of forms. As Lomas argues, Narcissus is usually in art a figure for the artist.<sup>25</sup> Picasso was the primary model for Mailer's own creative shape-shiftings:

The twentieth-century artist who conceivably had the most influence on my work was not a writer but Picasso. He kept changing the nature of his attack on reality. It's as if he felt there is a reality to be found out there but it's not a graspable object like a rock. Rather, it's a creature who keeps changing shape. And if I, Picasso, have been trying to delineate this creature by means of a particular aesthetic style and have come only this far, then I am going to look for another style. And off Picasso goes into a new mode of attack on reality. It's as if you have to work your way up the north face of the mountain, come back and do the south face, the southwest face, so forth.<sup>26</sup>

Mailer here outlines both his philosophical and artistic attitude to the problem of realism. In effect, he rejects a traditionally “realist” account of reality (“a graspable object like a rock”), for a preoccupation with the numinous and the transformative. The question of the real in Mailer precisely hinges on the quest to glimpse the hidden substratum of experience that lies behind everyday “social reality”. And this in Mailer is at heart a modernist project. In modernism, reality is shifting, perspectival, ungraspable except by constant formal change (this will later extend in postmodernism to a more radically perspectivist view of reality, which I argue Mailer consistently rejects at the level of form). And if the nature of reality is liquid and formless, the artist strives to be similarly mercurial.

The “quick-change artist” in Mailer is evident in the formal shifts of his major fiction and non-fiction, as if each new style were an attempt to catch reality unawares, “to catch the Prince of Truth in the act of switching a style”.<sup>27</sup> But this stylistic shifting is also evident in his occasional forays into visual culture, such as his Warhol inspired experimental films. The film writer Justin Bozung argues that Mailer’s late sixties avant-garde movies are cubist experiments in cinematic perspective.<sup>28</sup> These films are all also explorations of male performance, with Mailer playing iterations of his public image. *Maidstone*’s Norman T. Kingsley, a film-director and presidential candidate, is a literal exploration of the death of the author, while in *Wild 90* Mailer’s character The Prince’s shadow boxing and posing in the mirror suggests less egotism than a haunted fixation in masculine posturing. Outside of cinema, Mailer also built in this period a Lego City of





**Fig. 2. Still from Wild 90 (1967)**

the Future, a fixture of his Brooklyn apartment, a literally cubist experiment which was designed as a baroque utopian riposte to the architectural formalism of Le Corbusier and Bauhaus.<sup>29</sup>

Mailer's artistic transformations in the sixties coincided with similar trajectories in the visual arts, most notably Pop Art. Mailer was often ambivalent about Andy Warhol, who he once called the "maggot genius of American culture".<sup>30</sup> Key to this is Mailer's hostility to postmodernism's emphasis on surface and irony, which is also related to sixties arguments about camp and moral seriousness. Mailer was also wedded to modernist humanist notions of authorship and subjectivity, all of which were put into question by Warhol's bringing of mechanisation and repetition into the art-making process. Yet, like Warhol, Mailer was fascinated by American fame and the rich image bank of sixties media culture. In 1960, Mailer wrote his influential "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" for *Esquire*, an essay that anatomised John F Kennedy's glamorous new era of mediated Hollywood politics. In identifying with the Kennedy moment, Mailer was also announcing his own entry into the sixties as the modernist hero stepping into the mass media marketplace. What is less recognised is



**Fig. 3. Lego city of the future**





**Fig. 4. Andy Warhol, window display at Bonwit Teller department store (1961)**

how Mailer was exploiting in journalism the same Pop iconography that Warhol was to employ in art. “Superman Comes to the Supermarket” is contemporary with Warhol’s pre-silkscreen Superman painting, exhibited as part of the famous Pop exhibition in the window of New York’s Bonwit Teller department store.

Mailer and Warhol’s uses of the image bank were rather different tonally, not least because Mailer’s masculine image and identifications contrasted with Warhol’s gay appropriation of the images of mass culture. Yet they did share one substantial thematic interest: violence. The Kennedy era was formative for both Mailer and Warhol largely because the traumas of the period fuelled their imaginative preoccupation with death and disaster. The *October* critic and theorist Hal Foster has argued that behind Warhol’s affectless silkscreens of Jackie Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe lurked American mass culture’s more wounded and violent obsessions. The celebrity silkscreens accordingly demand to be read in parallel with the *Death in America* series, Warhol’s aestheticised images of car crashes, electric chairs and suicides. For Foster, this preoccupation with trauma was not simply thematic but *aesthetic*. Trauma, Foster claims, underlines Warhol’s aesthetic strategies of repetition and screening, and that the subject of Warhol’s painting is often a mass-mediated traumatic subject in American culture, a subject that was profoundly ambivalent about death and violence.<sup>31</sup>

Mailer’s work, with its repeated visitations to the deaths of Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe, is also interested in this collective fascination with violence in postmodern

American society. The key fiction here is *An American Dream*, a surrealist violent fable that holds a dystopian mirror to the traumas of the Kennedy era, but has also been a central work for feminist critics who highlight parallels between the text and Mailer's assault on his wife Adele. Judith Fetterley reads the stabbing as a sexual-political inversion of Valerie Solanas' attempted assassination of Warhol later in the decade.<sup>28</sup> Fetterley is the only critic to have explored the Mailer-Warhol relationship in any detail, and her feminist critique plays an indispensable role in this study's wider exploration of the aesthetics of trauma. As we shall see in chapters 3 and 4, *An American Dream* is a personally and politically entangled work about the decade's national traumas whose narrator, Stephen Rojack, also has an especially traumatic relationship to the feminine.

The sixties were Mailer's decade, and the artistic and political arguments of the period are the primary focus here. Nevertheless, the thesis covers a large amount of historical ground, from the Cold War through to Vietnam; from feminism to postcolonial politics in Mailer's book *The Fight*. The study begins in 1948 with Mailer's first novel *The Naked and the Dead*, and ends at the height of the postmodern eighties and nineties with the Reagan era works *Ancient Evenings* and *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. A key end point is marked by his critical review of *American Psycho* in 1991, which stages one last time his running generational argument with postmodernism (although his 1994 interview with Madonna is a more engaged encounter with a postmodern sexual persona). At this point, Generation X writers such as Wallace and Ellis, in mutually antagonistic ways, were exploring very different forms of American inwardness and American narcissism. Another key point is the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the discourse of the "end of history". After this point, Mailer's writing becomes increasingly historical and retrospective, often revisiting old themes and interests rather than having anything pressing or new to say about contemporary America.<sup>33</sup> And also at this time, the dialectical tension between modernism and postmodernism in his work largely begins to slow down or cease altogether.

My reading of Mailer's relationship to postmodernism draws on a range of critical

theory about the subject, from Hal Foster to Fredric Jameson and others. It is also informed by two critical studies by Josh Cohen and Joseph Tabbi, each of which place Mailer as a transitional figure in the story of postwar fiction.<sup>34</sup> Cohen sees Mailer's work in terms of a crisis of seeing in postmodern culture, one that relates to ideas of mass culture and visual spectacle that are also explored here. Tabbi's account of the postmodern sublime plays a particularly crucial role, however, for this thesis. Tabbi's book on technology and postmodernism regards Mailer as an opponent of conditions that will later be taken up aesthetically by postmodern fiction and cyberpunk. I argue that the postmodern sublime represented for Mailer not just a challenge in terms of technology, but a representational crisis for fiction more generally, and that this crisis formally intrudes as early as the supposed naturalism of his first fiction *The Naked and the Dead*. There was never a period when the question of realism in Mailer was transparent.

This study also draws on a broad range of psychoanalytical, feminist and cultural theory to explore Mailer's relationship to narcissism, masculinity and sexuality. My argument unashamedly draws on a complex history of feminist perspectives on Mailer, but argues that while feminist critique remains historically and aesthetically necessary for a reading of his work, it is not sufficient to account for his restless exploration of masculinity as a subject. As I will argue in chapter 6 and elsewhere, Mailer is a great though sometimes troubling twentieth century explorer of what Camille Paglia calls sexual personae.<sup>35</sup> A key reference point for this study's interest in narcissism and masculine self-presentation is the English journalist Mark Simpson, who cites Mailer in his 2002 *Salon* article "Meet the Metrosexual". Overall, I err on the side of taking Mailer's interest in masculinity critically but seriously, and not just as a subject for mockery or scorn. Masculinity was in an important sense his medium, and the sexual politics of his work is best understood when examined through an *aesthetic* lens. In chapter 7, I will also examine the postcolonial politics of *The Fight*, which is not only I argue a descendant of Saul Bellow's African novel *Henderson the Rain King*, but also

includes Mailer's most extensive discussions of his own Jewish identity. This chapter also covers the much discussed critical issue of Mailer's romantic fascination with black culture that started in "The White Negro".

Overall, I try to balance these theoretical perspectives with close readings of the work, to connect the abstract arguments to the particulars of language, imagery and form. Since Mailer is a writer whose work has so often been usurped by his public personality, it's particularly important to remember that his fiction and non-fiction consists of individual literary works, which have their own internal logic and which create their own parameters for interpretation. Often, it has been most interesting to see how a theoretical idea finds a distinct stylistic expression in one work, and a completely different one in another. At other times, I extend an argument beyond the confines of a particular book, as in chapter 6 which is loosely based around the arguments Mailer puts forward in *Prisoner of Sex* (1971). At other times, this has meant sacrificing a closer consideration of a work that might merit further analysis. The 1967 novel *Why Are We in Vietnam?* deserves more attention than it receives here, but the most obvious omission is that this study doesn't offer a substantial reading of the 1955 novel *The Deer Park*. While this can be justified by the fact that this novel was a transitional one, considerations of space and the overall argument have meant that I only briefly take account of Mailer's third novel. Overall, however, this study is informed by a belief that there is no inherent conflict between the critical priorities of theory and cultural studies and a close, perhaps even generous, engagement with works of literature in their own aesthetic terms.

1. The classic contemporary account of the new sensibility is Irving Howe's "The New York Intellectuals" (1968), *Selected Writings, 1950-1990* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 240-280.

2. "Books like Norman Mailer's *The Armies of the Night*, by disposing of the convention of journalistic objectivity, often penetrated more deeply into events than accounts written by allegedly impartial observers. The fiction of the period, in which the writer made no attempt to conceal his presence or point of view, demonstrated how the act of

writing could become a subject for fiction in its own right. Cultural criticism took on a personal and autobiographical character, which at its worst degenerated into self-display but at its best showed that the attempt to understand culture has to include analysis of the way it shapes the critic's own consciousness." Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (London: Abacus, 1982), 16.

3. *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History* (New York: Signet, 1968), 16.

4. Woody Allen's famous line in *Sleeper* (1973) that Mailer had "donated his ego to Harvard Medical School" is representative.

5. D.T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (London: Granta, 2012), 152. Kindle file.

6. *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (London: Abacus, 2005), 51.

7. Jonathan Franzen has called this the "postmodern suspicion of realism". *How to Be Alone* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), 246.

8. "Advertisements for Norman Mailer", *The Los Angeles Review of Books*. 3 October 2011. Web.

9. James Campbell wrote in his obituary of Mailer that "Something Mailer did better than writing novels was to apply the techniques of fiction to a non-fiction subject." *The Guardian* 12 November 2007. Web. 20 January 2016. This fault-line between fiction and non-fiction is a major theme of much Mailer criticism.

10. Jonathan D'Amore writes about Mailer's autobiographical narratives in relationship to 21st century "memoir culture" in *American Authorship and Autobiographical Narrative: Mailer, Wideman, Eggers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 1. D'Amore writes that "Mailer's embrace of the nuances of self-promotion and his acceptance of the inevitability of an author's partial abdication of control of his or her reputation marks a newly formed postmodern conception of authorship" (61). While D'Amore rightly identifies Mailer's participation in the rituals of fame and mass culture, this study looks at the idea of persona and authorship in Mailer from a broader art-historical perspective.

11. David Lomas, *Narcissus Reflected: The Myth of Narcissus in Surrealist and Contemporary Art* (Edinburgh: Fruitmarket Gallery, 2011), 17.

12. *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 66.

13. *On Metapsychology*, 85.

14. "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood" (1910) in *Art and Literature: Jensen's Gradiva, Leonardo Da Vinci and Other Works* (London: Penguin, 1985). 151-231.

15. *On Metapsychology*, 251-268.

16. *Civilization, Society and Religion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 305.
17. *Advertisements for Myself* (London: Panther, 1968), 270.
18. *Advertisements for Myself*, 294.
19. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real: Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates* (London; New York: Verso, 2002), 5-6.
20. *Advertisements for Myself*, 286.
21. *A Transit to Narcissus: A Facsimile of the Original Typescript* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1978), 34.
22. The standard psychoanalytic essay on the theme of narcissistic misrecognition and the mirror is Lacan's "The Mirror Stage", *Écrits: A Selection* (London: Routledge, 2001), 1-8.
23. Specifically, Scarr analyses the face of a woman he is trying to seduce and compares her to Maillol and Gaston Lachaise. This is an early example of how male anxiety in Mailer is projected onto an allegorical and non-idealised femininity. *A Transit to Narcissus*, 41-42. See chapters 3 and 4 of this study.
24. *Modest Gifts: Poems and Drawings* (New York: Random House, 2003), 11.
25. Lomas 19.
26. *The Spooky Art: Thoughts On Writing* (New York: Random House, 2014), 156.
27. *Advertisements for Myself*, 19.
28. Personal correspondence, October 2014. Bozung is compiling the first major book of criticism on Mailer and cinema. The book, *Film is Like Death*, is forthcoming by Bloomsbury in 2017.
29. See "Statement for *Architectural Forum*" as reprinted in *Cannibals and Christians* (Aylsebury, Bucks: Sphere, 1969), 277-79.
30. "Mailer Meets Madonna." *Esquire* September 1994: 59. As late as 2006, Mailer thought of Picasso as the avatar of modernism and Warhol of postmodernism. Mailer also related postmodernism to a "loss of humanism". See *Selected Letters of Norman Mailer* (New York: Random House, 2015), 729-730, 630.
31. "Death in America", in Colin McCabe et al. ed, *Who Is Andy Warhol?* (London: BFI, 1997), 117-130.
32. See Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), especially 162-164.
33. In his late phase, Mailer wrote that "Today, most of my ideas are less involved with new exploration than with occupying thematic territories I reconnoitred years ago". *The Spooky Art*, 128. *Harlot's Ghost* (1991) activates a retrospective turn in Mailer's

writing towards historical and biographical subjects: a return to the obsessive Kennedy moment in *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery*; a biography of Picasso; and novels about Jesus and Hitler. While these books are not in the purview of this study, the case for the later works has been made in John Whalen-Bridge's essay collection *Norman Mailer's Later Fictions: Ancient Evenings through Castle in the Forest* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

34. Josh Cohen, *Spectacular Allegories: Postmodern American Writing and the Politics of Seeing* (London: Pluto Press, 1998) and Joseph Tabbi, *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (Ithaca, N.Y. ; London: Cornell University Press, 1995).

35. Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage, 1991).



## Chapter 1. From realism to black humour: totalitarianism and mass culture in *The Naked and the Dead*

When Norman Mailer went to serve as a rifleman in the Pacific theatre during World War II, he went with the specific intention of writing the definitive novel of the conflict. The resulting work, *The Naked and the Dead*, was published in 1948, and was an immediate critical and commercial success. At the age of 25, Mailer was famous, and the result was an identity crisis that fuelled his literary imagination for the rest of his life. Taking its cue from the social realist novels of the twenties and thirties, most notably those of John Dos Passos, the novel provided sustenance for a reading public hungry for naturalistic detail about the conflict. Just as readers of *Moby Dick* invariably learn a quantity of arcane whaling lore, Mailer's first novel documents the minutiae of army life in documentary detail. From a certain critical perspective the novel has become definitive of its author. So authoritative was its early fame that Mailer is frequently regarded as a direct descendant of the social realists that so decisively influenced the novel. The novel emulates, but does not represent a significant stylistic advance from those novelists Mailer devoured at Harvard in the late thirties/early forties, including Dos Passos, John Steinbeck and James T. Farrell; its innovation was rather, as Diana Trilling saw it, that it brought to a "familiar subject the informing view of a new and radically altered generation".<sup>1</sup>

But what developments were emerging from this "informing view"? Two separate critical frameworks present themselves, one historical and one formal. The first is that *The Naked and the Dead* is frequently regarded as a novel with a direct anti-fascist, anti-totalitarian political sympathy. In this it was very much in the mood of the immediate post-war and early Cold War literary and intellectual environment (for example, George Orwell was among the admirers of the work<sup>2</sup>). Further, as Nigel Leigh has noted, Mailer's novel reflected a pervasive fear on the American Left of a home-spun American fascism, a fear notably expressed by Henry Wallace's Progressive Party, which Mailer was involved in during the 1948 election.<sup>3</sup>



The second framework that presents itself is that *The Naked and the Dead* arrives at a median point in the development of the American novel. Mailer's novel falls quite uneasily between two literary generations. The dominant realism of the novel must be acknowledged, but the novel also looks forward in flashes to the postmodern black humour fiction of the sixties. Although Mailer was a product of the earlier literary and intellectual generation, it is this latter decade and milieu which coincides with his own most creatively fertile period. The central contention here is that the historical political argument of *The Naked and the Dead* is inseparable from a discussion of its own internal aesthetics and its anticipation of emergent cultural forms and styles, specifically that of Pop Art. This chapter will begin by offering a brief account of critical readings of Mailer's first novel, and in particular how critics have assessed its apparently anti-fascist stance. It will then proceed to extend this critical history by a close reading of the novel's ending, which deviates stylistically from the prevalent texture of naturalism. Does this foreshadow a postmodern aesthetics, or does it position itself with the negative assessment of mass culture evident in the writings of the Frankfurt School and post-war New York intellectuals?

The action of *The Naked and the Dead* takes place on an entirely fictitious island in the Pacific called Anopopei. Aside from interspersed 'Time Capsule' episodes, where we see portraits of the soldiers' civilian lives, the novel is about Americans far from home, threatened by a largely invisible Japanese 'other' and a hostile natural environment. Anopopei is nevertheless a divided America in miniature, where distinctions of class, ethnicity, religion and geography are not so much erased as repressed. The sadistic hierarchy of the military, embodied in the proto-fascist General Cummings, is not only an allegory of a nation crippled by an experience of Depression, but also the vision of a potentially fascist future. The novel's plot vacillates between two estranged and incommensurable spheres: those of the enlisted men and the officers. This early novel was naively but consciously Marxist, and its enlisted men are profoundly alienated from the officer class, and effectively from the products of their own military "labour".

For most commentators, the ideological centre of the novel consists in the scenes between the quasi-fascist General Cummings and Lieutenant Hearn. Cummings is very much the author of the Anopopei campaign; his insistence is that the army should be rigidly controlled by means of a “fear ladder”<sup>4</sup>, and he also acts as a prophet of a home-spun popular American fascism. This conflict between Cummings and Hearn is usually read as a sophisticated engagement between totalitarianism and liberalism. Their scenes are compelling as ideological debate, but more than that are a sustained literary study in the use of top-down power and sadism. Considerable dramatic energy is expended in these passages, and Cummings’ totalistic power is seemingly affirmed by the final humiliation and death of Hearn, an inexperienced officer sent out on the abortive reconnaissance mission that constitutes the novel’s final section. However, the campaign is finally won not by Cummings’ strategic brilliance, but through the inadvertent actions of the bureaucratic Major Dalleson in Cummings’ absence. Much of the novel’s narrative power dissipates with this failure of the will to power; the terrifying fascist future, it seems, was already anachronistic. As Michael K. Glenday notes, “Mailer’s conclusion dramatises his view that the political future belongs not to dangerous mystics like Cummings, but rather to the system’s slaves, men like Major Dalleson [...] it was Dalleson, not Cummings, who epitomised the safe mediocrity of American decline”<sup>5</sup>. Cummings’ disproportionate, and eventually dissipated, dramatic energy leaves us with a conclusion that several critics have regarded as anti-climactic. Donald Pizer deals with this fall off by arguing that: “The *Naked and the Dead* is naturalistic fiction rather than fiction modeled on Shakespearean tragedy, and in naturalism the symmetry of high tragedy – of a fall to death – is often replaced by the anti-climax of mixed and ambivalent conclusions”<sup>6</sup>. There will be more to say about the tragic, but useful as Pizer’s analysis is it seems insufficient to simply appeal to the exigencies of genre and mode.

Many readings of the novel emphasise that the novel is about the fragility of personality and the human subject in the context of a vast technological social machine. Nevertheless, one paradox that the novel posits is that Cummings contains

transcendental energies which countermand such a reading. Glenday writes that “For all that must be said against the fascist disposition of Cummings or Croft, both men possess qualities which fly in the face of machine mentality”<sup>7</sup>. This contradiction Joseph Wenke sees as saying something fundamental about totalitarianism: “Though a totalitarian movement may well have its origins in a powerful and charismatic personality committed to risk-taking as a means of achieving power, totalitarian institutions gravitate inexorably toward a consolidation of power and an elimination of personality”<sup>8</sup>. This is consistent with the heterogeneous theory of personality that Georges Bataille espouses in his essay “The Psychological Structure of Fascism”. For Bataille, totalising or fascistic institutions, most notably at the level of the nation state, are profoundly homogeneous in their forms of expression (which is to say rigid and uniform). Nevertheless, homogeneous society secures its coherence by the expulsion of heterogeneous elements, whether in the form of higher elements such as leaders, or lower social elements, the example Bataille uses being India’s “untouchable” lower castes. (Bataille’s argument depends upon the double meaning of *sacer* – sacred and impure – that was conventional in early twentieth century social anthropology). Bataille’s analysis of the structure of the army has application for *The Naked and the Dead*:

The glory of the chief essentially constitutes a sort of affective pole opposed to the nature of the soldiers. Even independently of their horrible occupation, the soldiers belong as a rule to a vile segment of the population [...] But even the elimination of enlistments from the lower classes would fail to change the deeper structure of the army; this structure would continue to base affective organisation upon the social infamy of the soldiers. Human beings incorporated into the army are but negated elements, negated with a kind of rage (a sadism) manifest in the tone of each command, negated by the parade, by the uniform, and by the geometric regularity of cadenced movements. The chief, insofar as he is imperative, is the incarnation of this violent negation. His intimate nature, the nature of his glory, is constituted by an imperative act that annuls the wretched populace (which constitutes the army) as such.<sup>9</sup>

Essential to Bataille's point is that the homogeneous core of the army need not derive from an inherently homogeneous lower class. In fact, Mailer's novel emphatically illustrates this thesis in a specifically American context, at the nexus of class and race. It's not just that middle-class New Yorkers are fighting beside rural Southerners, but also that Hispanics are fighting next to Jews, intellectuals next to drifters. The homogeneous is not the communal, since the novel seems to imply that America's communal experience of Depression leading into World War has only savagely exacerbated social and racial division; any equality the novel presents is only an equality of abjection. However, Mailer suggests a possible resistance to the "geometric regularity" of social control lies in the enlistments' coarse obscene language and earthy sexuality, which he associates with a bottom-up American democratic freedom. The question then might be: does *The Naked and the Dead* succeed in individuating its men as a form of resistance to the social model of a Cummings? Cummings himself suggests not:

In the army the idea of individual personality is just a hindrance. Sure, there are differences among men in any particular Army unit, but they invariably cancel each other out, and what you're left with is a value rating. Such and such a company is good or poor, effective or ineffective for such or such a mission. I work with grosser techniques, common denominator techniques. (140)

As Bataille writes, "the mass that constitutes the army passes from a depleted and ruined existence to a purified geometric order"<sup>10</sup>. Cummings is an agent of this depersonalising, unifying principle. And yet, as several critics have noted, Cummings embodies a contrary principle, of a charismatic and mystical self. Leigh writes that Cummings has a "basic originality, the fact that Cummings cannot be reduced to a particular system", and it is this originality "which so impresses Hearn"<sup>11</sup>. For Bataille, the heterogeneous fascist leader is precisely irreducible and unassimilable to system.

Yet Mailer is also interested in exploring the limitations of the totalising will to power that Cummings seems to embody. What might this limitation be? Several critics

have held that the novel displays a universe where human agency is profoundly delimited by chance. Joseph Wenke writes that Cummings “has difficulty countermanding the lethargy of the troops, and at the end of the book he is forced to admit that he really cannot force ‘the circuits of chance’, that, in fact, the battle for Anopopei has been won without him”<sup>12</sup>. Glenday is more explicit: “Chance, in the shape of Major Dalleson, defeats” Cummings<sup>13</sup>. These views seem to support a naturalist reading of *The Naked and the Dead*. Chance really does play a decisive role in the action: Croft’s mission to scale Mt. Anaka is finally thwarted not by internal class struggle amongst the men, or by the Japanese enemy, but by a disturbed hornets’ net. But there are other factors operating in Anopopei, which might complicate any view that prescribes Dalleson as a representative of chance. In a much misquoted passage, Cummings contemplates that:

For a moment he almost admitted that he had very little or perhaps nothing at all to do with this victory, or indeed any victory – it had been accomplished by a random play of vulgar good luck *larded into a casual net of factors too large, too vague, for him to comprehend.* [my italics] (536)

The powerlessness of the (here fascist) agent, then, is only partially to do with chance, or contingent natural process. It is also about Cummings’ perceptual inability to grasp the larger structural factors operating in the campaign. What Cummings is describing here is a kind of technological sublime: that which is incomprehensible is no longer to found only in nature, god or the universe, but also in a combination of systematic factors: military, technological and economic. In a persuasive analysis of Mailer’s book on the moon landings, *Of A Fire on the Moon* (1970), Joseph Tabbi has argued the case for a postmodern sublime, which he defines as referring to “networks of power and corporate control beyond the comprehension of any single mind or imagination”<sup>14</sup>, words that directly recall Cummings. Leigh’s reading of *The Naked and the Dead* succinctly defines the novel’s major debate:

*The Naked and the Dead*’s conflict with itself embodies a current

debate within the social sciences between those who perceive power as exercised by agents, and those who see it as the result of structural factors. In other words, *The Naked and the Dead* is poised between voluntaristic and structuralist conceptions of the world [...]

Cummings and Croft are effectively alienated from the military system and the political future. Mailer realizes that Major Dalleson, the organization man, is in ascendance [...] The image the novel leaves us with therefore is Dalleson's inane obeisance to structuralistic power.<sup>15</sup>

Here we are confronted with one of the major conflicts in Mailer's work. One of his key preoccupations is with the "great men" theory of the historical process, but this visionary stance lies in debate with just this opposing "structuralist" view. A commonplace of postmodern theory is that one feature of the postmodern is a diminishment of the allure of authority figures, and especially political leaders. Postmodern sublimity is structural rather than charismatic or original. Writers such as Bataille and Mailer are interested therefore in charting a historical loss of sublime agency, which might in part explain *The Naked and the Dead's* disavowal of the tragic. A sensuous idea of historical imagination and agency is being displaced by a non-sensuous set of capitalist relations (which is one reason why both writers look back to primitive, pre-modern epistemologies). Indeed, the critics cited above notice a secret admiration of the fascistic energies of Cummings (and Sergeant Croft) in Mailer's novel, which directly belies its declared anti-fascist position.

This paradox runs throughout Mailer's work and through postwar modernism at large. The key question is one of "authority". Authority in the post-war period was increasingly challenged in literature and art as well as politics. One might perhaps characterise the later Mailer as a kind of modernist nostalgist who is always arguing for the fecundity of the sublime imagination against processes of banalisation. His aesthetics (which is also to say his emphasis on sense experience) is in this sense often in tension with his overt politics. But in another key sense there is an umbilical relationship between politics and aesthetics in Mailer's work. Let us look more closely at the novel's

eccentric conclusion. Leigh is right to say that the novel concludes with an image of Dalleson's "inane obeisance to structuralistic power". But this shift to a structuralist account of power is also accompanied by a *stylistic* shift in the novel. The very final pages of the book see Dalleson, after the mop-up of the Anopopei campaign, devising a schedule for a training program, "the part of military life that the Major found most congenial" (538-539):

At this moment he got his idea. He could jazz up the map-reading class by having a full-size color photograph of Betty Grable in a bathing suit, with the co-ordinate grid system laid over it. The instructor could point to different parts of her and say, "Give me the co-ordinates."

Goddam, what an idea! The Major chuckled out of sheer pleasure. It would make those troopers wake up and pay some attention in map class.

But where was he going to get a life-sized photograph? [...]

Dalleson scratched his head. He could write a letter to Army Headquarter, Special Services. They probably wouldn't have Grable, but any pin-up girl would do.

That was it. He'd write Army. And in the meantime he might send a letter to the War Department Training Aids Section. They were out for improvements like that. The Major could see every unit in the Army using his idea at last. He clenched his fists with excitement.

*Hot Dog!* (539-540)

Here, in this odd comic ending, the dominant and claustrophobic texture of naturalism seems to unpeel at the corners. Instead, this passage seems to anticipate the grotesque black humour of the comic novels of the nineteen-sixties. Glenday does note that this conclusion anticipates Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* in its comic tone<sup>16</sup>, and in the sixties Mailer is beginning to praise the "moral surrealism"<sup>17</sup> of writers such as Heller, William Burroughs, and Terry Southern. In his own work Mailer's proclivity for the surreal was being displayed as early as his second novel *Barbary Shore* (1951) and the short story "The Man Who Studied Yoga" (1952). *The Naked and the Dead* owes much to Dos Passos, but the shift of mode at the novel's conclusion in turn owes much to Dos Passos's contemporary Nathanael West, a demonstrable though rarely cited influence on

Mailer. Later criticism on West, most notably by Rita Bernard, has attempted to explain West's estrangement from the thirties literary canon by arguing that his work focuses not on the milieu of labour and production that the social realists were charting, but on the contrary to an emergent consumerism<sup>18</sup>. Once seen as high modernist, West's satirical works are now frequently regarded as anticipating the postmodern comic novel of the sixties and Pop Art.

The contention here is that this apparently formal question has direct relevance to *The Naked and the Dead's* historical argument. Why does *The Naked and the Dead* conclude with such a Hollywood ending? Dalleson's girly-picture map of Betty Grable is not an inappropriate image for a novel on World War II. During the war Grable was one of the most readily identifiable entertainers in the world, and particularly well-known to men in the armed forces for whom she was an ubiquitous pin-up. But Mailer's inclusion of an image from mass culture must also be understood in the intellectual context of the 1940s. The Frankfurt School is most closely associated with a critique of mass culture, but this had a particular domestic context for Americans. The emergence of the New York intellectual, dating approximately from the *Partisan Review's* restart in 1937 with a new anti-Stalinist but initially still socialist agenda, was concomitant with a comprehensively negative assessment of mass culture. This stance on mass culture was replicated by even the most dissident intellectuals. According to Andrew Ross, "Mailer, Mills, Howe, and others largely agreed with the picture which the Frankfurt School provided of a populace of dopes, dupes, and robots mechanically delivered into passivity and conformity by the monolithic channels of the mass media and the culture industries"<sup>19</sup>. It is perhaps true to suggest that Mailer shared this assessment particularly strongly at this early stage in his career, although he himself, a young, unpublished, and politically naïve author, had few direct links to the intellectual establishment. (His propulsion to fame would modify this state of affairs somewhat). Mailer never abandoned his perception of the negative effects of mass culture, but his later celebration of Hip culture in his essay "The White Negro" (1957) would perhaps





**Fig. 5. Betty Grable**

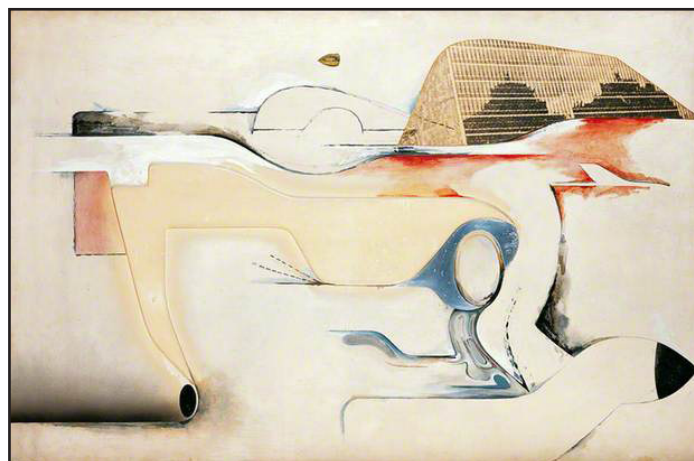
mark a break from the prevailing view of “serious” American intellectuals. Further, his later engagement with postmodernism became far closer to that of Susan Sontag, whose 1964 “Notes on Camp”<sup>20</sup>, an essay that seems to have deeply influenced Mailer’s writings on aesthetics, would voice ample reservations about the cultural forms it also celebrated.

Certainly there was a qualified enthusiasm on Mailer’s part for Pop Art, and in particular Andy Warhol, who prompted Mailer’s experiments in film in the late sixties. If he did not share what has often been considered Pop’s morally and politically neutral celebration of mass culture, the imagery he would evoke frequently bears comparison with Pop’s concerns. Like Warhol, Mailer was fascinated by the phenomenon of fame, and constructed his own distinct cultural iconography of figures such as Marilyn Monroe, John F Kennedy, and Muhammad Ali, among others. Further, early Pop Art works by Richard Hamilton, such as *Hommage à Chrysler Corporation* and *Hers is a Lush Situation* (both 1957) noted, in David MacCarthy’s words, “the formal parallels between automobile and female form”<sup>21</sup>. Mailer himself noted these formal connections in a piece entitled “A Note on Comparative Pornography”, published at around the same

time as Hamilton's work:

Talk of pornography ought to begin at the modern root: advertising. Ten years ago the advertisements sold the girl with the car – the not altogether unfair connection of the unconscious mind was that the owner of a new convertible was on the way to getting a new girl. Today the girl means less than the machine. A car is sold not because it will help one to get a girl, but because it already is a girl. The leather of its seats is worked to a near-skin, the colour is lipstick-pink, or a blonde's pale-green, the tail-lights are cloacal, the rear is split like the cheeks of a drum majorette.<sup>22</sup>

It's possible to see in Dalleson's Betty Grable map a piece of proto-Pop Art that anticipates the sexual iconography of Hamilton, Warhol, and Peter Blake. As a novel fundamentally preoccupied with masculinity, *The Naked and the Dead* closes with one of its few female images. Mass culture has often been constructed as feminine, in contradistinction either to a masculine, rugged and politically serious social realism on one hand, or on the other to an aesthetically serious high art, dominated by the man of genius in command of sublime creative power.<sup>23</sup> But in the sixties, all of these assumptions were beginning to be challenged, not only by feminism but also by the democratisation of art that was being led by Pop. Mailer's concern with what *Playboy* called the "womanization of America" was in some ways a conservative reaction against these processes.<sup>24</sup> But as Josh Cohen has also pointed out, Mailer was also concerned



**Fig. 6. Richard Hamilton, *Hers is a Lush Situation* (1957)**

here with a critique of mass culture as seduction.<sup>25</sup>

One of Mailer's more obvious preoccupations in the novel is with male sexuality. The defining sexual document of the period was the Kinsey Report (full title *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male*) in 1948, the same year as Mailer's debut. The Kinsey report, one of the key American documents of the century, collated an extraordinary quantity of statistical data on male sexual practise. Intriguingly, little of this data was collated from interviews with soldiers; Kinsey came to see World War II as a missed statistical opportunity.<sup>26</sup> But in *The Naked and the Dead* Mailer was to explore just that subject, informally but no less consciously. According to Clifford Maskovsky, who served with Mailer during the war, Mailer had conducted his own Kinsey Report in miniature while serving in the Pacific<sup>27</sup>. Mailer, armed with yellow notepad, discreetly and systematically surveyed his fellow soldiers about their sexual behaviour as a way of collating material for the war novel he intended to write about the conflict (the most famous result of this was linguistic: the novel became notorious for its obscenity, and in particular Mailer's invention of the word "fug"). *The Naked and the Dead*, then, was timely in its realistic portrayal of sexual material. Betty Grable's iconic image (an estimated five million copies of her famous over the shoulder photo were distributed to servicemen during the war<sup>28</sup>) alluded to a more playful, innocent sexuality. She famously claimed to be "strictly an enlisted man's girl"<sup>29</sup>, a statement which played to the notion of the rude good humour of the common soldier, in distinction to the aloof sterility of the officer class<sup>30</sup>.

Is it possible, then, to read Mailer's Betty Grable map as a class-political celebration of proletarian sexuality? Finally *The Naked and the Dead* negates this thesis, since the mass-produced, mass culture image is manipulated and controlled by the very administrative officer class which the image ostensibly mocks. Although *The Naked and the Dead* seems to retain a residual commitment to Popular Front rhetoric, it marks a decisive break from the populism of a Steinbeck and the other Depression-era social realists. Adorno and Horkheimer coined the term "culture industry" in order to divest

the term mass culture of its potential folk or populist meanings. The argument goes that mass culture is totalitarian precisely in this capacity to “enlist” citizens to a particular set of practices of consumption. In an “Impolite Interview” with the *Realist* magazine’s Paul Krassner in 1962, Mailer again found an appropriate metaphor for mass culture in military life. The strain between his populism and cultural pessimism is again clearly evident:

And you’re not drafted – your eye is not drafted when you turn on that TV set? To assume that people are getting what they want through the mass media also assumes that the men and women who direct the mass media know something about the people. But they don’t know anything about the people. That’s why I gave you the example of the Army. The Private exists in a world which is hermetically alienated from the larger aims of the Generals who are planning the higher strategy of the war.<sup>31</sup>

Mailer’s appraisal of mass culture would gain considerably in sophistication and he would break decisively from the *Partisan Review*’s orthodox line. Nevertheless, this assessment remained negative, and we see in his first novel the outline of a broad engagement with cultural arguments. *The Naked and the Dead* rhetorically charts a shift from fascist rule to a hegemony of the cultural fetish. Its conclusion points resolutely to what Adorno and Horkheimer call the “liquidation of tragedy”<sup>32</sup>, and to an emergent culture industry where political and sexual energies are negated and harnessed. What is not clear is the extent to which Mailer’s later revisions of stance provide an adequate model of resistance to this gloomy picture.

1. Diana Trilling, “The Moral Radicalism of Norman Mailer” (1962). Reprinted in Robert F. Lucid, *Norman Mailer: The Man and His Work* (Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown, 1971), 115.

2. See Christopher Hitchens, “Norman Mailer: Remembering the pint-size Jewish fireplug.” *Slate*. 11 November 2007. Web. 27 September 2014.

3. Nigel Leigh, *Radical Fictions and the Novels of Norman Mailer* (London: MacMillan, 1990), 5-6.

4. Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead* (London: Allan Wingate, 1952), 136. Citations are hereafter bracketed in the text.
5. Michael K. Glenday, *Norman Mailer* (London: MacMillan, 1995), 47.
6. Donald Pizer, *Twentieth-Century Literary Naturalism: An Interpretation* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 107.
7. Glenday 54.
8. Joseph Wenke, *Mailer's America* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1987), 9-10.
9. Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 150.
10. Bataille 150.
11. Leigh 22.
12. Wenke 33.
13. Glenday 55.
14. Tabbi, Joseph, *Postmodern Sublime: Technology and American Writing from Mailer to Cyberpunk* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 30.
15. Leigh 22, 29.
16. Glenday 50.
17. Norman Mailer, *Cannibals and Christians* (Aylesbury, Bucks: Sphere, 1969), 62.
18. Rita Barnard, *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance: Kenneth Fearing, Nathanael West, and Mass Culture in the 1930s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). See also Jonathan Veitch, *American Superrealism: Nathanael West and the Politics of Representation in the 1930s* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), and Thomas Strychacz, *Modernism, Mass Culture, and Professionalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).
19. Andrew Ross, *No Respect: Intellectuals and Popular Culture* (New York, London: Routledge, 1989), 52.
20. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001), 275-292.
21. David McCarthy, *Pop Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 32.
22. *Advertisements for Myself*, 350-351.

23. Andreas Huyssen discusses the association of mass culture with the feminine in chapters 3 and 4 of *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1988).
24. The phrase is Philip Wylie's, who coined the term in the September 1958 issue of *Playboy*. Mailer sat as panelist on a *Playboy* colloquium published in the June 1962 issue, where he discussed the "the womanization of America". Extracts from Mailer's replies to the colloquium are published in the essay collection *Cannibals and Christians* (230-237). For more on Mailer, feminism and mass culture see chapter 6 of this study.
25. Cohen writes about the Betty Grable map, and Mailer's association of mass culture with the feminine, in chapter two of his *Spectacular Allegories: Postmodern American Writing and the Politics of Seeing* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 26-28.
26. Roy Grundmann, *Andy Warhol's Blowjob* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2003), 84.
27. Peter Manso, *Mailer: His Life and Times* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 74-75.
28. Doug Warren, *Betty Grable: The Reluctant Movie Queen* (London: Robson, 1982), 79.
29. "Betty Grable." *IMDb*. Web. 28 Sept. 2014. Internet biography.
30. Mailer's novel prosecutes this sexual-class rhetoric through the implicit homosexuality he ascribes to Cummings. In a piece entitled "The Homosexual Villain" written for the gay magazine "One" in 1955, Mailer repented the association between fascism and homosexuality he had made in his first novel. See *Advertisements for Myself* 187-195.
31. Norman Mailer, *The Presidential Papers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), 141-142.
32. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1997), 154.



## Chapter 2. The road to “The White Negro”: a politics as part of everything else in life

### *Introduction to “The White Negro”*

Mailer’s 1957 essay “The White Negro” is commonly agreed upon as a decisive departure in his stylistic and intellectual development. It has also earned an uneasy reputation as one of the most infamous oppositional texts of the nineteen fifties. Mailer’s essay both mythologises and politicises one of the most anti-authority figures in fifties cultural discourse, the “white negro” hipster, a genuine subcultural phenomenon increasingly visible in popular culture in films like *Rebel Without A Cause* and *The Wild One*. Mailer’s affinity for the hipster’s rebellious lifestyle put him by association on the obverse side of what Fredric Jameson calls “the balance sheet of fifties culture”.<sup>1</sup> Had “The White Negro” simply reproduced another image of fifties rebellion, however, it would have doubtless not enjoyed its initial cachet in intellectual circles (however qualified that happened to be). Its innovation was in its explicit attempt to theorise the ideological and historical conditions of that rebellion, and by extension to substantially (and with a strong strain of poeticism) expose on a number of fronts the ideological assumptions of the period.

From an initial aerial view of a catastrophic postwar modernity, “The White Negro” quickly swoops down to street level with Mailer’s reflections on this familiar social type, “the American existentialist – the hipster”.<sup>2</sup> Mailer was finding in this subculture an exciting and potentially radical subjectivity that was rejecting the social and sexual ideologies of its time. A “wise primitive in a giant jungle” (275), the hipster lives in “that enormous present which is without past or future” (271), and not only rebels, but tries to “remake a bit of his nervous system” (278). By removing “every social constraint” of “sex, private property, and the family” (286), the hipster flirts with both nihilism and violence, but always with a view to enhancing his own “creative possibilities”, and to fashion the self beyond not only the restraints of social



institutions, but also his own socialisation, to “pass by symbolic substitute through the locks of incest” (278). The hipster’s commitments to “lifemanship” (282) and cool (tropes that are ultimately traced to black American experience) are creative and affirmative strategies, it is suggested, for surviving the depressions and excitations of contemporary history, with its accelerated and “overstressed” temporality.

Taking much of its ideas and imagery from the radical psychoanalysis of Wilhelm Reich, including the notorious “apocalyptic orgasm” (279), Mailer constructs a complex genealogy for his highly idealised white hipster, which takes in the hipster’s sociological roots in the “avant-garde generation” (272) of Greenwich Village bohemia. Mailer explains the hipster’s fascination with black style and the “instantaneous existential states” of jazz as a response to the “general anxiety” of post-war culture: “it is no accident that the source of Hip is the Negro for he has been living on the margin between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries” (272). In turn, critic after critic<sup>3</sup> has accused Mailer of opportunism, irresponsibility, or downright foolishness in re-inventing a fantasy of black vitality and sexual expressiveness, transmitted through jazz, “the music of orgasm” (273). For this reason and more, the essay antagonised almost everybody, from Beats to African American critics, liberals to leftists, although the essay did enjoy a brief but influential cult and was a key document of the sixties counter-culture. The essay’s cult is long over: no one now takes it for a Bible of dissent or a political manifesto. Yet it has remained a remarkably resilient sign-post for a number of trends in American culture. If it to some degree retains its status as a wild avant-garde folly, the essay has nonetheless established itself as a text of the widest relevance to cultural studies. At the time, Mailer wrote that “A prime virtue of ‘The White Negro’ may be in the number of heresies it commits” (290).

Among the many critical readings of “The White Negro” from a seemingly comprehensive range of critical viewpoints, Thomas Hill Schaub’s analysis of the essay in *American Fiction in the Cold War* (1991) is among the most searching and critical. Since this reading, critics such as Joseph Tabbi and Josh Cohen have advanced readings of

Mailer's poetics in general that point to what Cohen calls a "third way"<sup>4</sup> in Mailer's politics, based on critiques of technology and visibility respectively. My own reading will ultimately endorse and develop these later readings. This reading might be deferred, however, since Schaub's Cold War analysis of "The White Negro" will play a vital role in framing the essay in its historical and cultural context. My own reading of *The Naked and the Dead* attempted to situate Mailer's first novel within arguments about politics and culture raging among the New York intellectuals. Similarly, Schaub situates "The White Negro" within what he calls the postwar "liberal narrative".<sup>5</sup> Schaub's particular focus is that of the broad process of deradicalisation undergone by left intellectuals in the historical circumstances of the Cold War. By way of illustration, Schaub offers a historical overview of American intellectuals recanting their previous commitments to one variety or another of socialist thought and action, culminating in the Cold War consensus discourse of "The God That Failed".

How does this affect our reading of "The White Negro"? Schaub writes: "'The White Negro' [...] is commonly read as one of the most radical expressions of disagreement with the prevailing 'conformity' of its era and as a prophetic description of the disruptive and liberating cultural events during the sixties". Schaub challenges "The White Negro"'s reputation as a manifesto of radical non-conformity. For him, it represents the "radical imagination's difficulty in reinventing the possibility of significant social change"<sup>6</sup>. Asserting itself as a heretical assault on liberal values, "The White Negro", Schaub argues, can nevertheless be read and reincorporated into the consensus liberalism it ostensibly opposes. For Schaub this is most evident in what he sees as "The White Negro"'s unquestioning acceptance of the failure of socialist experimentation and class agency, and its disillusionment with Enlightenment narratives of history in the wake of the concentration camps and the atom bomb. In short, Schaub argues that Mailer's essay did not provide a significant variation on the prevalent discourse of "totalitarianism".

Mailer's career, Schaub argues, is symptomatic of "the evaporation of the

naturalist and class-conscious assumptions” of American social fiction. Observing a wide replacement of “metaphors of class with those of ‘mind’ or ‘consciousness’ or ‘imagination’”<sup>7</sup> as a recurring pattern in thought of the period, Schaub argues that “The White Negro” was founded on these foundational categories of consensus liberalism. As a consequence, Mailer’s romantic analysis “looked to psychological types, states and qualities, rather than to socio-economic groups, for the germinating bed of a new revolutionary time”.<sup>8</sup> From “The White Negro” on, Mailer’s literary career essentially elaborates the theme of advertisements for the self, culminating in his subjective, third-person journalism of the late sixties, such as *Armies of the Night*. This turn to the vicissitudes and imperatives of the self, rebellious or otherwise, and the hipster’s commitments to “growth” Schaub interprets as analogous to the logic of “laissez-faire capitalism”.<sup>9</sup>

Schaub’s reading offers the most extensive historicist analysis of Mailer’s relation to the intellectual context of the Cold War period. However, as a work of historicist criticism it is very much a product of its own time, the period of left-pessimism during the Reagan-Bush era. Later revisions of the postwar cultural period have emphasised the methodological limitations of criticism of the eighties and early nineties. Morris Dickstein, for example, has argued Cold War scholarship took “little account of other influential factors in postwar social life”, and often occurred at the expense of primary readings of the period’s literature and painting.<sup>10</sup> More politicised revisions of the period from David Craven and Nancy Jachec have attempted to resuscitate the notion of abstract expressionism (the most notable American “Cold War” art form) as a radical aesthetic practice.<sup>11</sup> These critics accuse earlier critics such as Serge Guilbault of a methodological error in reading Cold War politics and cultural production both through the unproblematic lens of the “dominant ideology” of “cold war liberalism”.<sup>12</sup> This causes critical distortion because (a) it tends to neglect or fails to differentiate the philosophical and political intentions of the artists and their art and (b) it sees cultural practice as an unconscious effect of a dominant ideology rather than a potentially

autonomous site where ideology operates in a more complex, interrogatory way.

Schaub's reading of Cold War fiction in terms of a "liberal narrative" is open to the same charge.

Schaub's account of the arc of Mailer's career has its own particular blind spots. While the "evaporation" of the "class conscious assumptions" of the thirties has to be part of any historical evaluation of Cold War fiction and art, there are other factors at play than the admittedly potent one of the deradicalisation of the left. As my reading of Mailer's first novel stresses, *The Naked and the Dead's* continuation of naturalist, class-conscious fiction was not as effortless or as unproblematic as Schaub implies. While allegorising domestic divisions, the novel's action was played out in the somewhat more formalised and artificial hierarchies of the army. Additionally, it was a novel already embroiled in Cold War era anxieties about totalitarianism and mass culture. Schaub's "liberal narrative" is also oddly deficient in socio-economic analysis. While Schaub rightly points out the shift away from analyses based on modes of production, he tacitly makes class-based analysis (and its concomitant fictional form, social realism) a fundamental condition of value. Consequently, the available and widely divergent post-productionist models are evaluated solely in negative terms, rather than for any intrinsic analytic value they may or may not possess. For instance, "The White Negro"'s mixture of Marx and Freud is described as an integral part of the postwar "liberal architecture"<sup>13</sup>, where in fact it resembles (and later by way of the sixties New Left becomes historically associated with) the anti-capitalist analysis of Herbert Marcuse. Moreover, Schaub also leaves underanalysed Mailer's actual Cold War politics, which as we shall see are inseparable from aesthetic questions.

In this chapter, these issues will be tested through a close reading of "The White Negro" and related pieces from *Advertisements for Myself*. The traumas that Schaub posits as central to the development of Cold War liberal ideology (the Moscow Show trials, the Holocaust, Hiroshima, "totalitarianism" in general) are certainly registered in "The White Negro". But this does not necessarily indicate that ideology speaks,

ventriloquistically, through Mailer in the essay. Mailer's self-confessed challenge to prevailing orthodoxies can be read as an uneven working through, in the psychoanalytic sense, of essential historical, personal and creative rhythms, towards a new and self-guiding set of aesthetic and intellectual principles. The reading that will be offered here will give proper weight to the matrix of historical and political influences that inform the essay, and will interrogate the points of engagement, unconscious reproduction and divergence from critical elements of contemporary thought. Focal issues will be: (a) "The White Negro"'s first intimations of a highly personal redefinition and reworking of the prevalent totalitarianism model; (b) "The White Negro"'s aesthetics, both its style and its new focus on sense experience and (c) mass culture and the "postmodern sublime". Overall, "The White Negro" will be seen as not only marked by the kind of traumas that Schaub delineates, but as itself an examination of trauma and its historical and subjective conditions. As this and the next chapter will demonstrate, trauma is a critical concern of Mailer's "existential" critique of American society.

*"Our Country and Our Culture"/ Barbary Shore*

Long before "The White Negro" had offered its form of utopian non-conformity, however, Mailer had declared his refusal of the alignments of consensus politics in terms that were rather different. Mailer's two major public contributions to Cold War cultural politics were his speech at the 1949 Waldorf Peace Conference<sup>14</sup>, and his contribution to the 1952 *Partisan Review* symposium "Our Country and Our Culture". Under Malraux's "powerful intellectual influence" (AFM 87), Mailer had come to a Trotskyite analysis of the Cold War superpowers as equally complicit in

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Fig. 7. Our Country and Our Culture

an emerging global capitalist war economy. If the speech at the Waldorf was largely political in content, in “Our Country and Our Culture” Mailer articulated his refusal of the symposium in directly modernist terms. “Our Country and Our Culture” asked a number of prominent intellectuals their relationship to their country and its values in the face of the Cold War. Amid a climate of national affirmation, Mailer opened his statement characteristically: “I think I ought to declare straightaway that I am in almost total disagreement with the assumptions of the symposium”:

This period smacks of healthy manifestoes. Everywhere the American writer is being dunned to become healthy, to grow up, to accept the American reality, to integrate himself, to eschew disease, to re-value institutions. Is there nothing to remind us that the writer does not need to be integrated into his society, and often works best in opposition to it? [...] If and when [a genius] arrives may I speculate that he will be more concerned with ‘silence, exile, and cunning,’ than a strapping participation in the vigors of American life. It is worth something to remind ourselves that the great artists – certainly the moderns – are almost always in opposition to their society, and that integration, acceptance, non-alienation, etc. etc. has been more conducive to propaganda than art.<sup>15</sup>

Mailer later described this symposium as his formal “coming out”<sup>16</sup> into the intellectual world, despite his opposition and hostility to its premises. For while Mailer was putting political distance between himself and *Partisan Review* intellectuals, he was nevertheless aligning himself with their modernist cultural values. *Partisan Review*’s William Phillips later remarked that until that point Mailer, perceived as a naturalist and as a “popular” writer, had been viewed as outwith the “more modernist [...] symbolic tradition”<sup>17</sup> espoused by the journal. Whether calculated or not, this had something of a positive effect in legitimating Mailer as a writer within intellectual circles. By citing the oppositional tradition of “the moderns”, especially through Joyce’s “silence, exile, and cunning”, this was also a reminder that *Partisan Review* was in broad support of the cultural Cold War, a series of initiatives aimed at promoting Western cultural superiority and extolling/exporting the values of American democracy to European intellectuals.

Mailer's second novel, the quasi-surrealist rooming-house drama *Barbary Shore* (1951), marginally predates his participation in the *Partisan Review* symposium, but in both its politics and aesthetic characteristics is its fictional correlative. Described by Mailer as his "most autobiographical novel"<sup>18</sup>, *Barbary Shore's* choice of imaginative location is closely based on Mailer's residence in the late forties in 20 Remsen Street, Brooklyn, and important characters are based on acquaintances such as his neighbour, Charles Devlin (who is the model for the novel's revolutionary, McLeod). Michael K. Glenday describes the narrator-protagonist Mickey Lovett as "a projection of Mailer's changing self as he moved away from the political activism of the late 1940s to explore the radical individualism which would issue forth in 'The White Negro'".<sup>19</sup> Where *The Naked and the Dead's* social and geographical canvas was expanded, *Barbary Shore's* was contracted to a small series of rooms that signifies a constriction in both social and psychic space. *Barbary Shore's* claustrophobic and menacing setting evokes the paranoia of this period, and has been characterised as a "strange parable about the rival oppressions of the Cold War"<sup>20</sup>, allegorically treating the factional politics of its time.

*Barbary Shore* has from the start been seen as a flawed and deeply uneven second novel. (Irving Howe, who would later print "The White Negro" in *Dissent*, reviewed it critically, for instance<sup>21</sup>). But the novel continues to exert a hypnotic and lurid power of curiosity, perhaps as a result of its hyper-saturated combination of imaginative materials. The relationships between the rooming-house's antagonists, mediated through the first person narrator's amnesiac frame of reference, plays out Mailer's developing political sensibility. The novel is dedicated to Malaquais, whose version of libertarian socialism provides the ideological framework for *Barbary Shore* as a political fiction. But Mailer later wrote that "*Barbary Shore* was really a book to emerge from the bombarded cellars of my unconscious" (*AFM* 87). *Barbary Shore's* odd, distorted tone is a product of this mixture of conscious political intention and unconscious "orgiastic" imagery.

*Barbary Shore's* slightly unhinged mixture of realism and surrealism hints at a modernist negativity, a refusal in Mailer's fictional practice of integration into Cold



War discourses that is echoed in his public statements. The novel mixes politics, nightmare states and sexual deviance to create an imagery that conveys, in Glenday's words, "the underside to that well-adjusted Cold War patriotism of the age".<sup>22</sup> At least one contemporary critic attacked the novel not for its politics, but for its atmosphere of moral infection or contamination.<sup>23</sup> *Barbary Shore*, wrote Sterling North, carried an "intention to debauch as many readers as possible" [...] When one has finished reading (by way of duty) this evil-smelling novel and dropped it gingerly into the garbage can, one has an overwhelming urge to take a hot bath with very strong soap" (qtd. in *AFM* 97). Emerging in an American period of "healthy manifestoes", *Barbary Shore* offered a fragmented atmosphere of "evil-smelling" and diseased otherness, anticipating in its modernist aesthetics the Joycean position of "Our Country and Our Culture".

*Barbary Shore*'s sense of otherness evokes an undoubtedly bleak moral landscape haunted by images of recent totalitarian horror. This circumscribes the novel's socialist politics, with most of the protagonists in one way or another ideologically or ethically embattled and/or perverted. In one critical passage, Lovett's neighbour Lannie Madison voices the view that Marxist optimism had been liquidated in the concentration camps:

There is a world, and this is what it is like: It is a tremendous prison, and sometimes the walls are opened and sometimes they are closed, but as time goes on they have to be closed more and more. Have you forgotten? Do you remember how the poorest of the poor used to be driven to the room where they were given death by gas?<sup>24</sup>

This is "*l'univers concentrationnaire*", a phrase coined by David Rousset in the forties that Mailer will later employ in "The White Negro" (*AFM* 271). Based on an analogy with the Nazi concentration camps, the phrase conveys the widespread contemporary anxiety, closely related to the discourse of "totalitarianism", that social and political experience in general is increasingly "concentrated" through various forms of state power. *Barbary Shore*'s engagement with historical "totalitarian" discourse is a major factor in its general air of political disillusionment (Glenday notes that only McLeod and Lovett retain



any “residue of a socialist humanism”<sup>25</sup> embodied in a mysterious “little object”). Extending from the immediate political crisis, however, was a more enduring concern of Mailer’s fiction and essays: the perceived crisis of modernity that resulted from recent historical events and that was registered variously in a number of critical discourses (Cold War liberalism; existentialism; the Frankfurt School).

*Barbary Shore*’s allegorical presentation of the holocaust is registered in the narrator’s crisis of memory: the question of the collective historical imaginary (“Have you forgotten?”) is intimately linked with Lovett’s amnesia. In the flat linguistic concentration of *Barbary Shore*’s opening pages (which are replete with suggestions of temporal dislocation, blindness, and dysfunctional memory), Mickey Lovett’s character is established by his lack of sense of personal history. The tone is set in the novel’s equivocal opening sentence: “Probably I was in the war” (11). While garlanded by wounds on his ear and back, Lovett cannot reconstruct the precise source of his trauma, and finds it “difficult to trust” (11) his memories. The failure to reconstruct a coherent psychic identity is literally mirrored in the surgical reconstruction of Lovett’s face:

When I stare into the mirror I am returned a face doubtless more handsome than the original, but the straight nose, the modelled chin, and the smooth cheeks are only evidence of a stranger’s art. It does not matter how often I decide the brown hair and the grey eyes must have always been my own, there is nothing I can recognize, not even my age. I am certain I cannot be less than twenty-five and it is possible I am older, but thanks to whoever tended me, a young man without a wrinkle in his skin stands for a portrait in the mirror (11)

This is the first moment of mirror recognition in Mailer’s canonical works, although as we saw in the introduction the theme appears as early as the apprentice work *A Transit to Narcissus*. The passage anticipates a number of Mailer’s literary obsessions, particularly themes of trauma and recognition.<sup>26</sup> The figuring of Lovett’s trauma in his surgically reconstructed face clearly mimics the historical traumas of the postwar period in general. Lovett’s amnesia covers both the personal, “my childhood and my youth” (12) and that “larger history” (probably, given Malaquais’ political influence, an allusion

to Marxist interpretations of universal history). This personal/historical amnesia is both traumatic and liberating, paradoxically enabling the narrator to possess “all history”: “No history belonged to me and so all history was mine” (12). Lovett’s status as a stateless, wounded hero operates to establish him as an existential, deracinated member of the World War II generation. This is the fictional Cold War embodiment of “silence, exile, and cunning”.

Variants on this kind of radically alienated individualism recur throughout postwar literary and artistic modernism. Schaub, for example, notes in Cold War fiction a turn to first-person narration and tendency for narrators to share divided consciousness and to inhabit underground space.<sup>27</sup> *Barbary Shore* can be paired with another of Schaub’s key texts, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952). But if the precepts that informed social realism had largely been abandoned, artists and writers turned to alternative aesthetic strategies to represent the bleakness and fragmentation of historical and social experience (the modernist autonomy of abstract painting is one such example; the heightened realism of Mailer and Ellison another). This turn to individualism was sometimes still connected to left-wing politics, although often in attenuated and pessimistic terms. *Barbary Shore* is an interesting example in that it shares a classically modernist suspicion of the burdens of history with an explicitly political sensibility and theme.

The question of “silence” also hangs over *Barbary Shore*’s imagination of the holocaust. Although Glenday describes the holocaust passage as “the only extensive reference to the subject in his work as a whole”<sup>28</sup>, its treatment raises particular questions when balanced with the novel’s general treatment of “history”. The presence of the holocaust hangs over much of the art of this period even where it is treated far less directly than in *Barbary Shore*. Hal Foster has argued that the aesthetic strategies and discourses of much modernist art (cited are art brut, COBRA, and abstract expressionism) often dealt ambiguously with this trauma:

Perhaps they provided a way at once to register the trauma of

the Holocaust and to disavow it. To seek radical beginnings registers the horror of the past, but it is also an escapist flight from recent history [...] It's not simply an either/or: either represent or disavow the trauma. There are aesthetic constructs that are almost compromise-formations – that acknowledge historical reality but in a bracketed, abstracted, or otherwise dehistoricized way. Again, the point is to describe these moves, to understand them, not to pathologize them.<sup>29</sup>

To put this in other words in respect of *Barbary Shore*, if “silence” can be claimed in one place as a heroic modernist refusal, in another it can be read as traumatic suppression. *Barbary Shore* is both aware of history and “abstracts” it through its allegory. While Mailer’s allegorical response to the holocaust is perfectly legitimate in aesthetic terms, it is equally as legitimate to ask how *Barbary Shore* ambiguously mediates this historical event, and what clues this gives us to the novel’s specific anxieties. What does the allegory function to display (what literary and ethical concerns of Mailer’s work does it anticipate, for example; how does it position itself in terms of “totalitarian” discourse), and what does it function to mask?

The writer most frequently invoked in discussions of *Barbary Shore* is Franz Kafka, and this seems correct in the specific sense that it shares with Kafka an allegorical fabulism.<sup>30</sup> The novel’s fabulistic elements consolidate the novel’s medievalistic imagery, most notably, its many “Arthurian references”<sup>31</sup>, the sum of which call on an atavistic and pre-modern frame of literary reference to evoke modern barbary. (A similar function is performed by the quotation from Mouffle D’Angerville’s *Vie Privée de Louis XV* which precedes that modern “gorge of innocence and virtue” presented in Mailer’s 1955 Hollywood novel, *The Deer Park*). In the key passage cited above, this fabulism contributes to a sense of the unbelievability, even unreality of totalitarian horror in general, and the holocaust in particular. This horror is deferred temporally in two directions: backwards through calling on a reservoir of literary and folk imagery and narrative conventions; and forwards towards the future “*l’univers concentrationnaire*” which it heralds.

*Barbary Shore*'s harsh depiction of a world divided into guards and victims connects with its Marxist theme of economic exploitation, but this in turn is translated into an ethical picture of a world that "devours" (177). Madison delivers an extended "story" about the camps, where guards sportively turn prisoner upon prisoner in a cannibalistic game: "and as they scratch and sob and bite each other's rind, the guards would turn on the gas and roar like mad for the fools thought one would be saved and so ate each other" (178). For Madison, the victims' participation in, and failure to resist, their own degradation signifies a general collapse of ethical "dignity" in the world at large. *Barbary Shore* is haunted by this nihilistic comedy of the contemporary lifeworld, but it would be mistaken to identify Madison's view with that of the novel, for three reasons. One, Madison's view is tempered and counter-pointed by Lovett's more humane, if embattled, ethical framework. There is a chiaroscuro inversion in the two characters, a complex interplay of dark and light (note their inverted initials). Like in many of Mailer's portraits of women (Deborah in *An American Dream*, Kitty in *Harlot's Ghost*) Madison represents the dark, irrational half of the hero's liberal humanism. Two, Madison's story illustrates, in vestigial form, Mailer's enduring preoccupation with, but resistance to, the ethical condition of the absurd. Three, from General Cummings' power-games in *The Naked and the Dead*, through to later works such as *Prisoner of Sex* (1971) and *Ancient Evenings* (1983), Mailer's works provide variations on one essential scenario of power. *Barbary Shore*'s fable illustrates one form of this scenario by revealing how the victims' moral culpability and "consent" was enforced in the camps by their comprehensive moral debasement by the guards.

This scenario, depicted by a Jewish American novelist in the immediate historical aftermath of the holocaust, is clearly haunted by images of Jewish suffering. However, while the references to "gas" and the chambers unmistakably ground this fable in the specific historical reality of the camps, *Barbary Shore* at best acknowledges Jewish experience only tacitly. Partly, this was due to Malaquais' intellectual influence on the novel's version of Trotskyism. McLeod, voicing Malaquais' ideas, explains the holocaust

as a by-product of the contradictions of capital and the permanent war economy. McLeod's depiction of a mass of present and future economic victims obscures the reality of racial genocide, which is relegated by McLeod to a complex of subsidiary "religious and political categories" (233).

Mailer's dependence on Malaquais was not the only factor at play here, however. *Barbary Shore* was typical of this early stage of postwar consciousness of the holocaust. Calling on the work of Peter Novick, the critic Andrea Levine has written about the historical factors that "transformed a broad postwar critique of totalitarianism into a more contemporary discourse emphasising the atrocities committed against European Jews".<sup>32</sup> Levine notes that in the initial period "specifically Jewish suffering played a distinctly marginal role in postwar public discourse".<sup>33</sup> In a reading of "The White Negro", Levine argues that Mailer's attempts to construct subjects who are unburdened by the "dead weight" of the past are marked and haunted by the specific burdens of Jewish history, and especially the holocaust. The rootless selfhood of *Barbary Shore*'s Mickey Lovett represents just such an "unburdened" historical subject. It is telling that any connection to Jewish identity is literally effaced in Lovett's "modelled" features (note his WASP-ish "straight nose" and "smooth cheeks"). Levine also argues that Mailer's masculine investments are marked by anxieties about feminised representations of the Jewish male body, which are further linked in the cultural imagination to "the image of the cowed impotent Jew, going meekly to the gas chamber".<sup>34</sup> *Barbary Shore*'s concentration camp fable tacitly recognises and negotiates just this anxiety.

*"The catastrophe – success"*

While Lovett's traumatic subjecthood is the principle aesthetic device through which *Barbary Shore* mediates its relation to contemporary history, Mailer's hint that the novel had an "autobiographical" source suggests the extent of his personal investment in this highly political fiction. There are obvious autobiographical echoes in Lovett, a writer who has, like Mailer, has returned from the war and is living in Brooklyn. In the

“Second Advertisement for Myself”, however, Mailer hints that *Barbary Shore* was a product of another, immediately personal trauma: the success of *The Naked and the Dead* and his own sudden introduction to celebrity. After *The Naked and the Dead*, Mailer felt personally divided from his public image: “Success had been a lobotomy to my past” (AFM 87). Again echoing *Barbary Shore*, Mailer records this separation from his past as existentially liberating: “Willy-nilly I had had existentialism forced upon me” (87), but this was also the source of a common but powerful creative anxiety: “had this first published novel been all of my talent? Or would my next book be better?” (87). *Barbary Shore* was a product of these anxieties coupled with the shocks of contemporary history, an “agonized eye of a novel which tried to find some amalgam of my new experience and the larger horror of that world which might be preparing to destroy itself” (87).

To what degree then can we take Lovett as a fictional projection of Mailer’s self? One trauma has already been broached here. Lovett’s complete separation from his past and his identity as an “orphan” possibly hints at a connection between personal experience and that “larger horror” in respect of Mailer’s own Jewish identity. The certain amount of unease about the past at play in “Second Advertisement for Myself” might be connected in some way to Mailer’s refusal after *The Naked and the Dead* to write about “Brooklyn streets, or my mother and father” (87). Whatever other relation to Jewish themes and concerns Mailer’s work may exhibit (itself a contentious issue), Mailer’s fiction does not deal with the conventional materials of novels of urban Jewish American experience. Lovett’s lack of a past and personal identity might also register anxieties about Jewish American identity and success in the public world. While it seems appropriate to desist from any formal evaluation of these issues in the present discussion, it also seems valuable to acknowledge their interpretative possibility.

Mailer’s experience of fame also had a major impact on his artistic identity. Mailer describes success as “an experience unlike the experience I had learned from books, and from the war – this was experience without a name – at the time I used to complain that everything was unreal. It took me years to realize that it was my experience, the only

one I would have to remember” (87). It did indeed take Mailer “years to realize” this experience, not simply on a personal level, but as something that might be exploited and realized in his work and public life. During the writing of *Barbary Shore*, Mailer was as famous as any young novelist in America, but other parallels aside this could not be inferred from Lovett’s muted self-image and the novel’s underground setting. Mailer at this point seemed to want to pursue “silence, exile, and cunning” as an artistic strategy, but this also illustrated the difficulties he had in assimilating this new identity.

In American postwar artistic culture, the impact of sudden fame is often registered as a longed-for liberation from family and self on the one hand, and an existentially dislocating trauma on the other. Mailer’s experience of identity crisis was by no means an untypical response to what a contemporary, Tennessee Williams, called “the catastrophe of success”.<sup>35</sup> The most sophisticated avant-garde explorer of American fame, both as aspirational fantasy and trauma, is of course Andy Warhol. Mailer and Warhol shared this interest in fame as a subject, and both also recognised fame’s traumatic potential (as their common interest in Marilyn Monroe and Kennedy attests). Hal Foster has coined the term “traumatic realism” to characterise Warhol’s silk-screen reproductions of stars and disasters. In a reading heavily informed by Lacanian psychoanalysis, Foster describes Warholian trauma as a “missed encounter with the real”.<sup>36</sup> In Warhol the telling symptom of trauma is repetition. Foster notes the function of repetition in Warhol: “repetition serves to screen the real understood as traumatic. But this very need also points to the real, and at this point the real ruptures the screen of repetition. It is a rupture less in the world than in the subject – between the perception and the consciousness of a subject touched by an image”.<sup>37</sup>

A similar screening operation is at play in Lovett’s mirror-portrait. A distinction can be made in that Lovett’s traumatised features signify first and foremost a rupture “in the world”; as we have seen the world of postwar devastation. Nevertheless, while this remains the image’s primary meaning, there remain signs in Lovett’s features of the other, subjective, authorial trauma. Here, what “points to the real”, and what Lovett

experiences as traumatic, is the very effacement of signs of “rupture” in the face with its lack of wrinkles and “smooth cheeks”. (There is something decidedly mask-like about this mirror-image). The “stranger’s art” (plastic surgery, but with some suggestion of the photographic image) appears to have been cosmetic as reconstructive; the face, “doubtless more handsome than the original”, is not only restored but somewhat aesthetically enhanced. And in an example of the novel’s doubling, Lannie Madison’s trauma is connoted by a “white splotch of powder” (178) on her face. An association of trauma and cosmeticism is key to *Barbary Shore*.

Lovett’s misrecognised image, melancholically perceived as superior to his “original”, authentic self, is of course primarily a fictional construction. Yet it is tempting to read this portrait in terms of Mailer’s self at age twenty five, his age on the publication of his first novel. At the time of *Barbary Shore*, Mailer was still a young man who may have felt some vulnerability about his public image, and even that he was “physically unattractive”<sup>38</sup> (his second wife Adele Morales thought this an important motivation<sup>39</sup>). Lovett’s melancholy recalls some of Mailer’s own reports of his unease at the dissemination of his public image in other places, for example, in “How To Commit Murder in the Mass-Media - B” (*AFM* 331-334). The response of “silence” appropriately conveys this sense of the initial shock of fame, although later Mailer will play out this trauma through a compulsive chatter of self-promotion and self-branding. This voice first arrived in militant mood in *Advertisements for Myself*.

If the success of *The Naked and the Dead* had plunged Mailer into the centre of the American scene, by the time of the publication of the collection *Advertisements for Myself* (1959) eleven years later Mailer’s writing was angrily and polemically registering his outsider status in respect to American culture. Although apparently a career retrospective, *Advertisements* representative tone is not that of retrospection and summation. Rather, it can be characterised as a bildungsroman, a form of psycho-autobiography of the creative consciousness. Its title suggests the paradoxes of its two main motivating impulses. In a not wholly ironic sense, *Advertisements* is a shameless act



of self-promotion, self-conscious of the need to advertise the “author’s personality” in the literary marketplace: “it is sometimes fatal to one’s talent not to have a public with a clear public recognition of one’s size” (21). The book in this sense is the first announcement of what will be publicly recognised as a uniquely narcissistic, highly masculinised literary persona. But *Advertisements* is also characterised by a militant counter-movement, and in this sense is a manifesto of an impassioned and visionary style of cultural criticism. These two divergent impulses mutually reinforce and comment on each other throughout the text and his career as a whole.<sup>40</sup>

While there are obviously marketing aspects to this gregarious, and promiscuous, use of the self, Mailer’s notorious “narcissism” is characterised by a tendency to use the self as a litmus test for wider social experience, an instance of the “collective condition” (271) to which it always wants to refer and to antagonise. One factor here, as Steve Shoemaker points out, is Mailer’s undoubtedly sincere desire to exert cultural influence through his writing.<sup>41</sup> This desire was militantly and famously asserted in *Advertisements for Myself*: “The sour truth is that I am imprisoned with a perception which will settle for nothing less than making a revolution in the consciousness of our time” (17). This desire was shortly accompanied by Mailer’s transition to sixties mass-market journalism and the multiple literary and public personae of the sixties. This transition has not always been warmly received by critics, who have sometimes suggested that Mailer’s pursuit of journalistic “chores”<sup>42</sup> (sometimes driven, as is occasionally pointed out, by the need for quick money for alimony payments<sup>43</sup>) has compromised his achievements in fiction. Shoemaker notes a certain reticence from critics “at the thought of Art fraternizing too closely with life, or worse yet politics”.<sup>44</sup> What these suspicions have tended to obscure, however, is that this fraternisation of art and life was a defining attribute of much sixties cultural production in general: Pop Art; avant-garde cinema and theatre; and the New Journalism.

Mailer’s transition from silence to gregariousness ran in rough parallel, then, with this wider shift in the postwar avant-garde as a whole. And for American art, this

transition was also bound up with the question of mass culture. In a major history of art since 1900, one member of the *October* group, Benjamin Buchloh, sketches out some of the key questions that confronted postwar modernism:

In addition to the first two complexes – namely, the trauma of World War II and the Holocaust and the destruction of the American Left and Left culture at large – a third question confronts the New York School in its formative stages: how does the mass-cultural sphere reemerge, and how should the avant-garde relate to that sphere? [...] Paradoxically, in the postwar moment, as the mass-cultural sphere in its American version reemerges with even greater power than in the twenties, the avant-garde withdraws into a mode of total denial of its existence [...] It takes at least ten years with the rise of Jasper Johns and proto-Pop Art, before the mass-cultural sphere reenters artistic awareness explicitly.<sup>46</sup>

My argument here is that Mailer was essentially grappling with the same problematic as the avant-garde in art. *The Naked and the Dead*, as the first chapter of this study has argued, was coterminous with the New York intellectuals' critique of a "totalitarian" mass culture. The correlative in painting of this discourse was the critical and institutional canonisation of abstract expressionism. Abstract expressionism, in turn, became a powerful modernist assertion (and guarantee) of the autonomy of the art object, and the subjective freedom of the artist, at a time when mass culture was regarded as ineluctably linked to American capitalism or contaminated by totalitarian ideology. *The Naked and the Dead*, however, followed the spirit of that critique by its incorporation of something very like a Pop painting *avant la lettre*. The significance of this was that Mailer was already dabbling in his fiction with the use of those very mass cultural elements that were being occluded from the most advanced modernist painting. And it was in terms of mass culture that Mailer's enlisted soldiers were finally anything but autonomous, free-acting subjects.

However, while this demonstrates a recognition of the strategic position of mass culture in the emerging postwar climate, Mailer had not at that stage explicitly identified an aesthetic to trace these developments. *Barbary Shore*, as we have seen, forewent a

specific concern with mass culture for a more protracted fictional engagement with Cold War politics and “totalitarianism”. *Barbary Shore*’s “silence, exile, and cunning” ran parallel with the autonomous freedom of abstract painting. The mass culture theme returned in the Hollywood novel *The Deer Park* (1955), which was partly based on Mailer’s own experiences as a screenwriter at Samuel Goldwyn’s MGM. *The Deer Park* was an important novel in Mailer’s development, not least because it was turned down by seven publishers owing to concerns about obscenity. The offending passages, about a Hollywood producer and a call girl, were relatively tame by later standards but publishers in the conservative atmosphere of the nineteen fifties deemed them unacceptable. Mailer’s account of this episode in “Fourth Advertisement for Myself: The Last Draft of *The Deer Park*” is in itself one of Mailer’s most important autobiographical pieces. He was on his way to the rebellious inward trajectory that culminated in the breakthrough of “The White Negro”.

The shadow of the conservatism of the Cold War hangs broadly over the novel. *The Deer Park* ties the Hollywood dream factory to McCarthyite ideas of sexual and creative corruption. Yet there were also signs, especially in the revisions that he made after the novel’s first rejections, of emerging interests in Hip, sexual mysticism and the illusionistic surfaces of contemporary America. While making his revisions Mailer began to experiment with marijuana and mescaline (he was also writing in this period his Lipton’s Journal, a marijuana inspired diary that was the imaginative store for the ideas that would emerge in “The White Negro”)<sup>46</sup>. Nathanael West’s Hollywood novel *Day of the Locust* (1939) was one of the models for *The Deer Park*. Mailer’s third novel thus anticipates Mailer’s sixties fictions and journalism, where West’s surrealist portrait of an America in orgiastic frenzy would be a motif in Mailer’s portraits of the cultural turmoil of the sixties. Yet while *The Deer Park* continues to have its admirers<sup>47</sup>, the novel was transitional both creatively and politically for Mailer: he had not yet found a creative solution to the impasses of his early work.

*“Politics as a part of everything else in life”: “The White Negro”*

What had changed by the time of “The White Negro”? “The White Negro” came at a time when Mailer’s politics were undergoing a radical overhaul. An early sign came in a 1955 interview with Lyle Stuart, who would have a decisive role in the circumstances surrounding the later essay. Mailer announced in this interview a change in his ‘social ken’ since *The Naked and the Dead*: “politics as politics interests me less today than politics as a part of everything else in life” (AFM 230). The exact significance of this shift to a “politics as a part of everything else in life” was at this point obscure. Its obscurity was largely a consequence of Mailer’s newly found determination not to treat phenomena discretely, but rather to see them as interlocking into a larger system of meaning. Some critics have regarded the problems this poses as insurmountable, complaining of an “ill-defined ‘totalitarianism’”.<sup>48</sup> Mailer’s seemingly self-contained vision of experience does pose special problems of articulation. His thinking and writing actively began to seek large terms which were irreducible to particular conventional categories of thought or belief, a prime example being that of “politics as politics”. However, this clearly should not imply that this system is unavailable to the historical and art-historical contextualisation that has been offered to this point. It is precisely an attentiveness to these contexts that will enable a reading that illuminates Mailer’s style of thinking outside the frame of reference of its own immanent terms. For instance, Mailer’s “politics as a part of everything else in life” might usefully be measured against the turn to “life” in the neo-avant-garde in general.

“The White Negro” was a serious and apparently sympathetic study of Beat subculture and a variety of everyday social types. The subject matter and its treatment were at odds with the canonically high modernist cultural values of the New York intellectuals. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, “The White Negro”’s accompanied its exposition of its “low” theme with an unmistakable statement of high aesthetic intent, Mailer’s first and most famous use of his signature long sentence. Tellingly, the essay’s opening has become a critical focal point for discussions of Mailer’s work overall. In the

wake of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, a strife-ridden contemporary modernity is the scene for a modern Fall:

Probably, we will never be able to determine the psychic havoc of the concentration camps and the atom bomb upon the unconscious mind of almost everyone alive in these years. For the first time in civilized history, perhaps for the first time in all of history, we have been forced to live with the suppressed knowledge that the smallest facets of our personality or the most minor projection of our ideas, or indeed the absence of ideas and the absence of personality could mean equally well that we might still be doomed to die as a cipher in some vast statistical operation in which our teeth would be counted, and our hair would be saved, but our death itself would be unknown, unhonoured, and unremarked, a death which could not follow with dignity as a possible consequence to serious actions we have chosen, but rather a death by *deus ex machina* in a gas chamber or a radioactive city; and so if in the midst of civilization – that civilization founded upon the Faustian urge to dominate nature by mastering time, mastering the links of social cause and effect – in the middle of an economic civilization founded upon the confidence that time could indeed be subjected to our will, our psyche was subjected itself to the intolerable anxiety that death being causeless, life was causeless as well, and time deprived of cause and effect had come to a stop. (270)

The reader of *Dissent* in 1957 could have been forgiven for being bewildered. Not necessarily because this passage displayed pessimism about the Enlightenment view of history – that was perhaps not so surprising after the historical catastrophes that Mailer invokes. Rather, Mailer's opening achieved a complete confrontation of generic and stylistic expectations. There was not only the apparent misdirection of the title (the promised "Superficial Reflections on the Hipster" seemed at first neither to be superficial nor about hipsters), but also the highly aestheticised "long sentence" confounded many of the generic categories of fifties discourse: from sociology, to Left/liberal journals such as *Partisan Review*, *Commentary*, *Politics*, *Encounter* and *Dissent* itself, through to topical, "Square" magazine articles such as Caroline Bird's piece for *Harper's Bazaar*, an extract from which prefaces the essay. This was trauma asserting itself not

just as a topic of discourse, but in the extravagant fragmented poise of the modernist long sentence.

Mailer's impatience with the categories of contemporary discourse is rendered in the sentence's shifting historical registers. But more, this is his variation on Adorno and Horkheimer's "dialectic of Enlightenment"; many of Mailer's assumptions about the myriad forms of contemporary "totalitarianism" can be traced in capsule to this point. In this paragraph Mailer presents what is not only the primal scene of history, but also of writing. At its end, grammar and civilization both "come to a stop".<sup>49</sup> The declarative authority of the opening sentence (itself undercut by that "probably" which tees it up) is in turn affirmed and negated in the second; affirmed since the long sentence asserts itself as a marker of a distinctive modernist style; negated because its grammatical disjunctions perform all the way down its apocalyptic narrative. At the level of the sentence, authorial "confidence" and "anxiety" match the historical rhythms of the project of modernity gone off the rails.

Postwar intellectuals, traumatised by the carnage wreaked by Nazism and Stalinism (conflated together in the Cold War as "totalitarian" by political thinkers such as Hannah Arendt<sup>50</sup>) did share a common perception of the totalitarian potential of Hegelian models of history, and the possibilities of articulation of socialist alternatives were indeed under considerable duress. But does this mean that "The White Negro" is a simple ideological product of Schaub's Cold War narrative? The essay's largest influence after all was on the New Left's absurdist atom bomb politics with its rejection of Cold War liberalism. Yet what is noticeable about the opening paragraph is the lack of an obvious historical subject. Despite the expectations aroused by the essay's title, there are no hipsters here yet, nor any sign of an anticipated racial subject, unless we see the unnamed and "unremarked" presence of Jewish or Japanese victims of war. The long sentence seems to confirm at least two negative readings of "The White Negro": that the essay's appropriation of black racial experience "functions in part to mask the presence of another racial body: the Jewish victim of the Nazi Holocaust"<sup>51</sup>; and that it

assumes the absence of a meaningful class subjectivity, for which the hipster provides a romantic substitute.

However, from another point of view a collective historical subject is tentatively acknowledged here: a collective *traumatic* subject, registered here in the reference to a collective “psychic havoc”. On whom does the “vast statistical operations” of history operate: the victims, or the survivors, “almost everyone alive in these years”? *Barbary Shore* provided an early instance of such a traumatic subject in Mickey Lovett, whose emergence from a milieu of totalitarian horror was figured in terms of mirror misrecognition. The mirror trope recurs in “The White Negro”, when Mailer states that “The Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked into it” (271). This evocatively implies that historical catastrophe is not the product of a dark impulse in Enlightenment modernity, but the product of a blinding excess of its light. In “The White Negro”, the real, in this case the traumas of recent history, blinds the subject’s capacity to represent it in images. In the postwar conditions of “The White Negro”, this imaginary glance into the mirror of history is again traumatically shattering for the subject.

What distinguishes “The White Negro” from *Barbary Shore*, however, is that it asserts a positive existential value to an otherwise traumatic modernity: “No matter what its horrors the twentieth century is a vastly exciting century for its tendency is to reduce all of life to its ultimate alternatives” (288). The intuition that contemporary experience might be traumatic, but also pleasurable, is a central theme of “The White Negro”. One manifestation of this excitement is the stylistic convulsions of Mailer’s sentences.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, Mailer argues that the rise of Hip, significantly modeled on black culture and experience, in a certain subset of white society could be understood as a response to the general condition of Western humanity following the shocks of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. Mailer proposes that the hipster’s potentially “life-giving” answer to contemporary destruction is to “accept the terms of death, to live with death as immediate danger”, to return sensually and primitively to the “most hideous

questions of his own nature” (271). The hipster in Mailer’s view presents exciting cultural possibilities for an anti-authoritarian style.

Regardless of its romanticism, the essay was prophetic of a half century of pop cultural style.<sup>53</sup> Yet the essay was also prophetic of a much more dangerous trend in American society:

Throughout most of modern history, “sublimation” was possible: at the expense of expressing only a small portion of oneself, that small portion could be expressed intensely. But sublimation depends on a reasonable tempo to history. If the collective life of a generation has moved too quickly, the “past” by which particular men and women of that generation may function is not, let us say, thirty years old, but relatively a hundred or two hundred years old. And so the nervous system is overstressed beyond the possibility of such compromises as sublimation, especially since the stable middle-class values so prerequisite to sublimation have been virtually destroyed in our time, at least as nourishing values free of confusion or doubt. In such a crisis of accelerated historical tempo and deteriorated values, neurosis tends to be replaced by psychopathy (277)

In passages like this, “The White Negro” challenges two prevalent myths of the self in fifties America: a) the conformist middle-class self of Cold War consensus culture and b) the socially adjusted self of contemporary ego psychology (a school Jacques Lacan had already attacked for its “white-nigger theory of the total personality”<sup>54</sup>). For Mailer, the dominant trend in the modern personality was embodied in an altogether more dangerous and alluring type: the psychopath, a figure at this time under serious scientific scrutiny, but also in the popular imagination a repository of various dark social fears and desires. This insight led to the making of a challenging prediction: “the psychopath may indeed be the perverted and dangerous frontrunner of a new kind of personality which could become the central expression of human nature before the twentieth century is over” (277).

Mailer’s prediction that psychopathy was becoming a defining condition of twentieth century humanity went significantly beyond strict clinical boundaries. Nevertheless, “The White Negro” drew substantially on clinical thinking, most notably



Robert Lindner's studies of the criminal psychopath in *Rebel Without A Cause* (1944).

The focus of Lindner's study was not, however, principally the everyday teenage rebellion featured in the James Dean movie of the same name. For Lindner, the psychopath was strictly a clinical social type with a range of anti-social and criminal personality traits that were quite distinct from normal forms of criminality and did not extend to the general population. Lindner, however, also felt that the definition of the psychopath's anti-social impulses was relative to the transgression of the culture's normative ethical code.<sup>55</sup> Any scientific analysis of the condition, therefore, had to take account not just of individual psychopathic traits, but also their "social setting".<sup>56</sup> Conventional psychiatry and psychoanalysis, according to Lindner, had been negligent in this regard.

Mailer, who had a close intellectual relationship with Lindner, saw his report as persuasive in its general criteria of psychopathic traits, but felt that but his study lacked an "essential sympathy" (277) with the condition. A discussion of the psychopathic personality, Mailer thought, was not simply pertinent to a discussion of socially demonised others (urban black males; juvenile delinquents; radical Bohemians). Rather, psychopathy was an increasingly influential and adaptive trait in American society at large:

the psychopath is better adapted to dominate those mutually contradictory inhibitions upon violence and love which civilization has exacted of us, and if it be remembered that not every psychopath is an extreme case, and the that the condition of psychopathy is present in a host of people including many politicians, professional soldiers, newspaper columnists, entertainers, artists, jazz musicians, call-girls, promiscuous homosexuals and half the executives of Hollywood, television, and advertising, it can be seen that there are aspects of psychopathy which already exert considerable cultural influence (277)

For Mailer, psychopathy was an increasingly integral feature of everyday life. This was in some respects extremely prescient. Clinical perspectives on psychopathy have now

moved on from the psychoanalytical perspective of the forties and fifties. There is some agreement, however, that psychopathy is a common trait in the non-criminal population, and is now regarded as a “spectrum of character traits, milder forms of which could even be useful and adaptive”.<sup>57</sup> Researchers now acknowledge the reality of the corporate psychopath, for instance, a figure that is now an integral part of our cultural landscape in novels such as Bret Easton Ellis’ *American Psycho* (1991), a novel that this study will return to. “The White Negro”’s discussion of the psychopathic personality, and its general probing into the causes and consequences of death and violence in contemporary American society, constitute one of the essay’s major claims to relevance today.<sup>58</sup>

What claims does Mailer make for the psychopathic personality in “The White Negro”? For him, something more fundamental is at stake than liberal-determinist ideas about social dysfunction or maladaptation. It’s not just that certain individuals have psychopathic traits, or even that it is relatively more prevalent in contemporary society.<sup>59</sup> The implication is much more radical: that the “accelerated historical tempo” of contemporary life *produces* desublimated, psychopathic subjects. For Mailer this is something to be at once abhorred and in some circumstances embraced. His white negro, for instance, is a special case, a “philosophical psychopath” (274) with an enhanced capacity for critical detachment and thereby potentially a model for a more creatively liberated self. This variation on “cool” resembles the “controlled de-control of the emotions” that sociologists suggest is a modern response to everyday shocks.<sup>60</sup>

“The White Negro”, then, is both a work of advocacy for an unfettered, non-conformist and unsocialised self, and a dire warning about its socially destructive present and future activities. This is the central ethical knot of Mailer’s often ambivalent relationship to violence: his willingness to analyse its moral and political conditions is matched by an insistent identification with violent acts and mental states. He himself has noted that underpinning *The Naked and the Dead*’s anti-war ideology was “an obsession with violence. The characters for whom I had the most secret admiration, like

Croft, were violent people”.<sup>61</sup> Mailer’s stance towards violence in “The White Negro” is irresolvably inconsistent and contradictory, but this very inconsistency is embedded in the essay’s anti-authoritarian politics.

The key to understanding this politics is Mailer’s long-standing opposition to totalitarianism. “The White Negro” marks a point, however, where Mailer’s definition of totalitarianism was undergoing radical revision, bearing little resemblance to the heavily politicised Cold War analyses of New York intellectuals. Mailer’s definition derives its force (though not its meaning) from the anxieties that accompany what we might call “historical” totalitarianism. Yet in “The Ninth Presidential Paper – Totalitarianism”, Mailer prioritises neither the nation state nor the authoritarian leader as the vehicles of totalitarian power. In his view “totalitarianism is better understood if it is regarded as a plague rather than examined as a style of ideology”.<sup>62</sup> The essential nature of “totalitarianism”, in Mailer’s view, lies in its nameless abstract horror. For this reason the notion in his terms is highly resistant to concise paraphrase, systematic explication, or any precise historical genealogy.<sup>63</sup> Instead, totalitarianism finds its roots in an existential rejection of history and its authority, and thus “came to birth at the moment man turned incapable of facing back into the accumulated wrath and horror of his historic past”.<sup>64</sup> What this seems to suggest is that totalitarianism is the product of collective strategies of denial, avoidance, and repression of the twentieth century and its horrors. This collective insulation from the real of history, Mailer argues, manifests itself in a tendency towards violence at both an individual level and in larger political forms.

For Mailer, the question of “facing” is not simply a product of the traumas of history, but is key to his sense of what underwrites contemporary mechanisms of power and violence. An interesting literary feature of Mailer’s work in this regard is his particular interest in the human face, and in particular the eyes. One paradigm of facing we have already observed is that of the mirror, first observed in *Barbary Shore* and recurring in “The White Negro”. This paradigm is essentially that of the self’s relation to its own identity and historical past. However, another paradigm of facing is that

between self and other, literally manifested in Mailer's writing in variations on eye-to-eye encounters, very often in scenarios of power or aggression, although ideally in love or attention. These essentially animal encounters dramatise a commitment to themes of intersubjective struggle and recognition.

This can be made clearer by illustration. Two days after the atrocity of 9/11, Mailer was reported in *The Times* as saying

If I am going to be killed, I want to see the eyes of the man who shoots me. I don't want to be killed by surprise. Apart from all the other horrors of the Nazis, the true horror was the way they gassed people who thought they were going to get a shower. That was the ultimate horror. This form of terrorism is equal to that.<sup>65</sup>

This is a notably different scenario of power from that presented in *Barbary Shore*, where *l'univers concentrationnaire* was dramatised as a scene of active and personal moral degradation. However, it is consistent with what Mailer sees as the core temper of modern terror: "the crucial characteristic of modern totalitarianism is that it is a moral disease which divorces us from guilt". Mailer illustrates this by asserting that totalitarianism in its contemporary American form "is as different from classical Fascism as is a plastic bomb from a hand grenade". Although the hand grenade makes an "imprecise weapon", the "aggression is still direct: a man must throw the grenade, and so, in the French sense of the word, he must 'assist' at the performance of the act". By contrast, the *bombe plastique* encapsulates a new logic since "the actor was now wholly separated from his act".<sup>66</sup>

Essentially, Mailer offers a variation on a commonplace insight of theories of modern warfare. The modern technological capacity for mass destruction increases the physical and affective distance between "actor" and "act" (to deploy Mailer's terms), which ends up in forms of moral and personal detachment. Terry Eagleton puts it this way:

Technology is an extension of our bodies which can blunt their

capacity to feel for one another. It is simple to destroy others at long range, but not when you have to listen to the screams. Military technology creates death but destroys the experience of it. It is easier to launch a missile attack which will wipe out thousands than run a single sentry through the guts.<sup>67</sup>

Mailer's version of this argument is grounded as much in aestheticism as ethics.

The price of the technological extension of the human sensorium for Mailer is that sense experience is increasingly impoverished. Anti-aesthetic forms such as plastic have an insulating effect on the senses that for him carries enormous costs in violence and alienation:

I think one of the reasons we have this huge amount of violence now in America is because we're such a plastic country. To get back to some real instinctive feeling, people tend to get more and more violent. If you live in a way where you can't feel your senses, then you have to go in for more and more extraordinary actions, and violence is one of them.<sup>68</sup>

The plastic texture of everyday life produces for Mailer a hunger for the real.

Psychopathy is thus merely an extreme form of narcissistic detachment which is built into the modern. However, this presents a central and probably irresolvable ethical question: is Mailer *exploring* the logic of violence, or is he *endorsing* it in a personal sense? The infamous solution of "The White Negro", after all, was to prefer personal violence to the impersonal operations of state violence, an idea which later extends to the totalising anti-aesthetic fabric of contemporary existence. Moreover, Mailer didn't always leave these ideas to fiction: he often experimented with them in life too in ways that were wholly disastrous. This has led to fierce criticism, from feminist critics among others. Judith Fetterley notes parallels between "The White Negro"'s ideas about violence and Mailer's real-life assault on his second wife Adele during a psychotic episode.<sup>69</sup> This is the ethical paradox at the heart of his work, which wants to confront the real but is sometimes open to the charge of fetishising acts of violence. Some of the consequences of this will be explored in the next chapters.

*“The re-emergence of the mass-cultural sphere”: navigating the postmodern sublime*

However, one key question remains to be asked. What connection does “The White Negro”, and its incipient redefinition of totalitarianism in terms of “sense experience”, have to do with what Buchloh calls the “re-emergence of the mass-cultural sphere”? In *Advertisements for Myself*, Mailer draws an explicit connection between “The White Negro” and a variety of “short pieces”, including “A Note on Comparative Pornography” and “From Surplus Value to the Mass Media”, that specifically deal with America’s commodity culture and were “written to go with” the earlier essay. *Advertisements for Myself* can be read as a key counter-text to the emergence of the Fordist economy of overproduction, planned obsolescence, and the psychoanalytical marketing techniques pioneered by Freud’s nephew, Ed Bernays.<sup>68</sup> The era of what Vance Packard called the consumer “waste makers” comes into full swing in the late fifties and becomes a key concern for Pop Art. In “The White Negro”, The “Square”, as opposed to the “Hip”, can in some respects be identified with the new American consumer. Moreover, it is plausible to suggest a connection between the psychopathic incapacity of the subject of modernity to “sublimate” in a world of “accelerated historical tempo”, and what Herbert Marcuse called the repressive desublimation of desire in American consumer society.

However, surprisingly little space is devoted in “The White Negro” to a discussion of consumer culture. What, then, is the relation of the “private vision” of Hip to the “mass-cultural sphere”? The answer to this can be found in a post-“White Negro” exchange with Jean Malaquais. This exchange was prompted by a private reply to “The White Negro” by Malaquais. This reply, and Mailer’s response, was later reprinted in *Dissent* and subsequent publications of the essay. It can therefore be taken as a significant gloss on the prior work. The exchange was significant in two major ways. Firstly, Malaquais was of course not just any other correspondent. He was the single dominant intellectual and political influence on Mailer after *The Naked and the Dead* (Malaquais was that novel’s French translator). His influence on *Barbary Shore* has already

been noted here, but Mailer also seems to have accepted Malaquais as a trusted critic of his work, to which Malaquais was often hostile. In a famous essay on Mailer, James Baldwin professed himself “astonished” that Mailer, the author of the mysticism of *The Deer Park*, desperately sought approval from Malaquais, but observed their interactions with interest, even jealousy: “there was a running, good-natured but astringent argument between them, with Malaquais playing the role of the old lion and Norman playing the role of the powerful but clumsy cub”.<sup>71</sup>

Baldwin’s “love letter” highlights a classic scenario of “anxiety of influence”, with the submissive son (Mailer) locked in intense oedipal rivalry with the paternal precursor (Malaquais). In his classic theory of poetry *Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom offers *Advertisements for Myself* as a rare illustration of his thesis from a work of prose. For Bloom, the title of *Advertisements for Myself* illustrates Mailer’s anxiety about the formidable paternal figure of Hemingway.<sup>72</sup> Hemingway is indeed a persistent presence in this text, culminating in a detailed account of sending Hemingway a copy of *The Deer Park*. But given the terms of his mentorship, Mailer had as strong a battle to overcome Malaquais’ influence over his ideas and style to advance to the independent authorial voice of “The White Negro” and *Advertisements for Myself*. This sense of poetic and intellectual rivalry is particularly marked in the exchange over “The White Negro”. Mailer plays explicit tribute to the “poetic excellencies” (293) of Malaquais’ style, only to stage his own intellectual swerve not only from Malaquais, but also effectively his own novel *Barbary Shore*. In so doing, Mailer would be better able to defend and articulate his own brand of cultural politics.

The second major significance of this exchange is that the major stake at play is the “white negro” hipster’s status as a historical subject. In his reply, Mailer sets out to refute Malaquais’s suggestion that the hipster is simply a disguised version of Marx’s lumpenproletariat. As Schaub notes, Mailer begins his reply with relatively conventional consensus thinking about historical totalitarianism.<sup>73</sup> Mailer describes the history of socialist experimentation as “enacted in the name of the proletariat but more likely an

expression of the scientific narcissism we inherited from the nineteenth century”, and a “collectivity which was totalitarian in the proof” (294). It is against this “totalitarian” backdrop that Mailer articulates his anarchic-utopian vision of “consciousness subjugated to instinct”, in the vanguard form of Hip’s revolutionary “creative adventurers” (294). Even if we factor in the role of technologisation in Mailer’s rallying call to instinctual life, this rhetoric seems idealistic at best. However, while these paragraphs do seem to confirm Schaub’s reading of the white negro as a displaced class subject, Mailer quickly moves the discussion onto new ground:

But of course this may be no more than the sword dance of my ‘romantic idealism’. Immediately, the charge by Malaquais is that the hipster is our old black sheep, our discontented nephew of the proletariat, the impotent lumpen no more than a thousand dollars away from kissing the penny-calloused hands of the petit-bourgeoisie. I wonder. Is it so very lumpen to be able to influence American culture? [...]

I wonder [...] if it would not be more “Marxist” to recognize that the superstructure of society has attained vast autonomies outside productive relations, psychological under-currents which often clash with material economic realities – as, for example, the swoop of the stockmarket in response to the Sputnik. There may even be ineradicable conflicts of interest between the superstructure and the base of productive relations. At the least, is it not reasonable to assume that society has reached a point of such complexity, such “organismishness”, that it is capable of adapting itself to avoid economic crisis by unwillingly (owing to the contradictions of mass manipulation) communicating mass psychological crises via the mass communications? (295)

This reference to this Sputnik here does not signify the propaganda initiatives of the Cold War. What Mailer is describing here in explicitly Marxist terms is the superstructural and technological complexity of capital in a new space age era of mass communication. Something of this disorienting complexity is captured in the awkward coinage “organismishness”. In the exchange with Malaquais, Mailer explicitly recognises what Fredric Jameson would later call the postmodern sublime. The dilemma of postmodernity is for Jameson “the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global and multinational and decentred communicational network in



which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects”.<sup>74</sup> Like Marshall McLuhan before him<sup>75</sup>, Jameson views the traumatic acceleration of postmodern time as a challenge for artistic representation. Modernist strategies of representation (which belong for him to the period of monopoly capital) are eclipsed under the insistence of the postmodern, which appears to “the initial bewilderment of the older modernism as the velocities of spacecraft to those of the automobile”.<sup>76</sup> The cultural logic of postmodernism necessitates what Jameson calls an “aesthetics of cognitive mapping”. What form Jameson expects this aesthetics to take is unclear: Jameson only insists that its political aim is to reorient the subject within the globalised “world space” of capital.<sup>77</sup>

Joseph Tabbi’s reading of *Of A Fire on the Moon* suggests that Mailer’s experience of a “loss of Ego” among NASA’s rocket technologies signals this postmodern disorientation.<sup>78</sup> What the exchange with Malaquais makes clear is that Mailer was by 1957 beginning to explicitly theorise the representational dilemma of cognitive mapping. “The White Negro” ends with a call for a “neo-Marxian calculus aimed at comprehending every process of society from ukase to kiss” (289). The important point to grasp here is that Mailer was attempting to intuit through the quotidian round of everyday experience a more general understanding of the mechanisms that operate beneath its surface. In a later interview, with the Marxist emphasis removed, Mailer elaborated that

I was coming to realize that everything in society from the largest social institution to those private and intimate personal moments, and the deepest mystical moments such as death, might all be seen in their connections.<sup>79</sup>

The mysticism here is crucial. Mailer in the fifties was not just trying to synthesise Marx and Freud (a project he quickly abandoned after “The White Negro”), but was also experimenting with marijuana and increasingly exploring what appeared to some as a private mysticism. But we can also see how this theological turn was also a way of addressing the central problem of the postmodern sublime. Mailer’s hip philosophy was

in part about a perceptual capacity to trace connections between private experience and social space.

Mailer's writing is animated by this urge to see hidden "connections" between disparate and seemingly unrelated aspects of contemporary life. In a post-"White Negro" interview with Richard Stern (which is significant for introducing Mailer's embattled theodical vision of God and the Devil for the first time), Mailer pointed to a hidden identity between novelists and hipsters.<sup>80</sup> Mailer defended this idea against Stern's suggestion that the assiduous organisational consciousness of the novelist clashes with the hipster's pursuit of instant gratification:

MAILER: As a writer I'm not interested in less expression.

What attracts me about Hip is that it's involved with more expression, with getting into the nuances of things.

STERN: More expression or more experience?

MAILER: The two have an umbilical relationship. What makes a novelist great is that he illuminates each line of his work with the greatest intensity of experience. One thing about Hip you have to admit is that the hipster lives in a state of extreme awareness, and so, objects and relations that most people take for granted become terribly charged for him; and, living in a state of self-awareness his time slows up. His page becomes more filled. (308)

For Mailer what links the writing of novels to "hip" forms of consciousness is this heightened awareness of everyday "objects and relations". Stern's response is here instructive:

Isn't a novel controlled by some overriding notion, by a kind of fanaticism which organizes a great deal of disparate material? In a sense, *a novel is like the mind of a madman: everything – casual looks, street signs, world news reports – is charged with meaning* [my italics] (308)<sup>79</sup>

For Mailer, what is exciting about the hipster is a "burning consciousness of the present" (274), a mystical sense that experience is "charged with meaning". Mailer is here accessing a Dionysiac component in popular culture which will explode in the sixties. But Mailer also attributes another common layer of experience to both the

novelist and the hipster, a “navigator at the seat of their being”, in the form of the unconscious and its “enormous teleological sense” (314). The introduction of the notion of a “navigator” that governs the writer’s consciousness of “objects” and their “relations” is a significant indication of Mailer’s commitment to outlining an aesthetics of cognitive mapping.

The arrival of a navigator in Mailer’s work coincides with the other shorter pieces in the last third of *Advertisements for Myself*, where Mailer interprets the significance of car advertising and orange juice cartons. These pieces have a certain affinity with the playful structuralist readings of commodity culture in Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* (1957). But, as Hal Foster notes, this structuralist interest in the sign was about to give way to a more “schizophrenic” form of postmodern abstraction:

the passage from structural linguistics to poststructuralist semiotics is a process of abstraction: in the first instance the referent is bracketed; in the second the signified is loosened, redefined as another signifier. A related passage occurs in advanced art of this century: first the referent is abstracted in high modernism, as in the characteristic nonobjectivity of its art and architecture, then the signified is released in postmodernism, as in our media world of simulacral images (Baudrillard) and schizophrenic signifiers (Jameson).<sup>82</sup>

It is in this latter postmodern context that Mailer’s navigator emerges. In his mapping of everyday world of “casual looks, street signs, world news reports”, Mailer is searching for a deeper associative structure within the uncontrolled postmodern sign-world.

Josh Cohen, whose reading of Mailer draws heavily on Baudrillard, calls this Mailer’s “allegorical impulse”. The presence of a “proliferating image-sphere of propagandistic spectacle”<sup>83</sup>, according to Cohen, is the historical precedent for a reversal in the polarity of subject and object, where the object world takes on an ominous subjectivity. As such, the visual thereby becomes a crucial contestatory site in postmodern fiction. This threatening reversal is the stage for an epic drama, enacted in Mailer’s writing in a series of antagonisms: between the authentic masculine self and the seductive world

of spectacle; subject and object; and the embodied eye and the image. Cohen's visual politics gambles all on the eye's capacity to remain unpenetrated and unabstracted by the "historical forces" of capital. In short, this depends upon a capacity for "outright withdrawal from the 'womanising' impulse of mass culture".<sup>84</sup>

Cohen's otherwise persuasive reading, however, makes too strong a case about Mailer's position in respect of mass culture. For Cohen, Mailer is "unrelievedly antagonistic"<sup>85</sup> in his opposition to the society of the spectacle. Yet at this very moment, Mailer, far from withdrawing from mass culture, was about to fully participate in it as one of its most prominent critics and avatars. Mailer navigated through the sixties in a highly productive period of cultural criticism, journalism, fiction, public action and cinema. This gregarious attempt to see hidden connections between phenomena and artistic forms defines the shape-shifting trajectory of Mailer's creativity in that decade. And this, I claim, was in essence an often impressive attempt at cognitive mapping. But mapping the world of abstract simulacra also presented an aesthetic challenge which Mailer didn't always successfully manage to resolve in fiction. The central problem is that the navigation of Jameson's world of "schizophrenic signifiers" risks precisely a kind of associational paranoia, or derealisation. If "reality is no longer realistic"<sup>86</sup>, how does fiction navigate between the poles of social realism on the one hand, and postmodern absurdist black humour on the other? The question of how fiction embeds itself in the real becomes a central aesthetic in Mailer, most notably in *An American Dream* which is among other things a fiction of paranoiac mapping. Nevertheless, what we see in the exchange with Malaquais over "The White Negro" is an explicitly Marxist recognition of that representational dilemma in terms of capitalism's increasing "organismishness". And, in a final dialectical turn, Mailer at this point abandons Marx and Freud, Malaquais and Lindner, for a *theological* vision of society which is in part an aesthetic attempt to grapple with the numinous question of the real in America's mediated culture. At this point we enter the sixties, and Mailer's mapping of the new national dreamscape of the Kennedy era.

1. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London, New York: Verso, 1991), 280.
2. *Advertisements for Myself*, 271. Citations to “The White Negro” and other pieces in *Advertisements for Myself* are hereafter are bracketed in the text, where appropriate with the abbreviation *AFM*.
3. Critics of the essay included James Baldwin, Jack Kerouac and Alan Ginsberg. It’s publisher Irving Howe later regretted his “scoop” in the famous essay “The New York Intellectuals” (1968). See Howe, *Selected Writings 1950-1990*, 278.
4. Cohen 29.
5. Thomas Hill Schaub, *American Fiction in the Cold War* (Madison, Wis: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), viii.
6. Schaub 138.
7. Schaub 149-150.
8. Schaub 145.
9. Schaub 159.
10. Morris Dickstein, *Leopards in the Temple: The Transformation of American Fiction, 1945-1970* (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 2.
11. Nancy Jachec, *The Philosophy and Politics of Abstract Expressionism, 1940-1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and David Craven, *Abstract Expressionism as Cultural Critique: Dissent During the McCarthy Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1999). Both these works are in part responses to Serge Guilbault, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983). For an overview of the cultural Cold War, see also Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (London: Granta, 1999).
12. Craven 43.
13. Schaub 149.
14. See the account of Mailer’s role in the Waldorf Conference in Stonor Saunders 51.
15. “Our Country and Our Culture”, *Partisan Review* 19.3 (1952), 299-301.
16. Manso 184.
17. Manso 183.
18. Manso 155.

19. Glenday 64.
20. Chris Harman, "The Prophet Armed", *Socialist Review* 252 (2001). Web. 4 October 2014.
21. See Manso 159.
22. Glenday 63.
23. Andrew Ross identifies this preoccupation with infection and health as a persistent Cold War trope, related to anxieties about communist otherness and invasion. See *No Respect*, 42-47.
24. *Barbary Shore* (1951; London: Panther, 1971), 177. Citations are hereafter are bracketed in the text, where appropriate with the abbreviation *BS*.
25. Glenday 65.
26. Josh Cohen writes that in this passage "The face, primary locus of the self's sense of identity, is here penetrated by the traumas of recent history, divesting Lovett's eye of visual authority, of the capacity to 'recognize' history and his own place in it" (29).
27. Schaub 69.
28. Glenday 70. However, Mailer turned again to the theme towards the end of his life in his novel about Hitler's childhood *The Castle in the Forest* (2007). In the epilogue to that novel, the devil's assistant Dieter is present at the liberation of a Nazi concentration camp. *The Castle in the Forest: A Novel* (London: Little, Brown, 2007), 463-464.
29. Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois and Benjamin Buchloh, *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 322.
30. See J Michael Lennon, *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 118. See also David Caute, *Politics and the Novel During the Cold War* (New Brunswick; London: Transaction, 2010), 333.
31. Glenday 70.
32. Andrea Levine, "'The (Jewish) White Negro': Norman Mailer's Racial Bodies." *MELUS* 28.2 (2003): 66.
33. Levine 66.
34. Levine 61.
35. Tennessee Williams, *Where I Live: Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1978), 15.
36. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Third Printing (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: The MIT Press, 1999), 132.

37. Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* 132.
38. Manso, *Mailer: His Life and Times*, 179.
39. Adele Mailer, *The Last Party: Scenes from My Life with Norman Mailer* (London: Blake Publishing, 1997), 91.
40. Mailer's tendency to talk of uniting the best and worst of creative motives is one index to this interaction. These two impulses have moreover been constitutive throughout the history of the avant-garde. Martin Puchner's work on the manifesto notes the complex interaction of utopian avant-gardist impulses with self-promotion and advertising. From Puchner's paper at the "Mapping the Neo-Avant-Garde" conference, University of Edinburgh, September 2005.
41. Steve Shoemaker, "Norman Mailer's 'White Negro': Historical Myth or Mythical History?", *Twentieth Century Literature* 37.3 (1991): 351.
42. *Pieces and Pontifications* (1982; London: New English Library, 1985), 134.
43. Germaine Greer argued that Mailer's "need for money" was an important factor behind the machinations surrounding *The Prisoner of Sex* and the Town Hall debate. See "My Mailer Problem" in *The Madwoman's Underclothes: Essays and Occasional Writings* (London: Picador, 1986), 79. Tennessee Williams made a similar point from a gay male perspective: "You know what happened to poor Norman Mailer. One wife after another, and all that alimony". Interview with Dotson Rader, "Tennessee Williams, The Art of Theater No. 5." *Paris Review* 81 (1981). Web. 4 Oct. 2014.
44. Shoemaker 351.
45. *Art Since 1900*, 322.
46. Lennon's account of the Lipton's Journal in *Norman Mailer: A Double Life* (182-194) is perhaps the most important account of this creatively transitional period to have emerged, in part because it provides new material about the Lipton's Journal that ties in with the final revisions of *The Deer Park*.
47. David Thomson has recently called the book "the best novel ever written about the movie business". "Norman Mailer's Hollywood: Antiquated, Perverse, and Much like Ours", *New Republic* 11 June 2014. Web. 6 July 2015.
48. Robert Ehrlich, *Norman Mailer: The Radical as Hipster* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1978), vii.
49. I am in part indebted here to Steve Shoemaker's reading of this "profoundly ungrammatical sentence": "the very convolutions of its style reflect the struggle to capture the besieged spirit of a crisis-ridden age, to register seismographically as it were, the effects, large and subtle, of the tragic events of recent world history on human consciousness" (345). See also Richard Poirier's discussion of the "long sentence" in *Mailer* (London: Fontana Collins, 1972), 74. As well as being influenced by Adorno here, I am also indebted to Marshall Berman's account of a double rhythm of adventure



and cataclysm in modernity. While Berman does not cite “The White Negro”, he does discuss Mailer’s Faustian reading of modernity in *Armies of the Night*. See *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London, New York: Verso, 1983). Berman writes about Mailer in 79-80.

50. Jachec 48.

51. Levine 60.

52. Richard Poirier rightly observes Mailer’s “partiality for those moments where more is happening than one can easily assimilate” (124).

53. The apotheosis of the white negro in American culture is probably Lou Reed, whose infamous “I Wanna Be Black” is part satire, part endorsement of hip. While typically hip is about a white appropriation of black style, in recent years this has become more porous and reversible. Perhaps the closest analogue to Mailer-as-persona in postmodern culture is not a novelist but Kanye West, whose hip-hop idioms intimately links narcissism to restless creative shape-shifting. Something of an inversion of the white negro in his confluence of preppy fashion style with macho bragging, West’s best work combines fame and narcissism with sonic and formal experimentalism, most notably in his 2013 album *Yeezus*. In chapter 7, I discuss how Mailer’s romantic fascination with blackness was connected to his own Jewish identity. And in chapter 6, I will show how Mailer’s essay also oddly anticipates metrosexuality.

54. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, London: Routledge, 2002), 147. The French reads “sous la motion nègre-blanc de la personnalité totale”.

55. Robert Lindner, *Rebel Without A Cause: The Hypnoanalysis of a Criminal Psychopath* (London: Research Books, Ltd, 1945), 1. One of the revelations of Lennon’s 2013 biography is the extent of Mailer’s close relationship with Lindner in the years immediately preceding “The White Negro” (163-165).

56. Lindner 1.

57. Laura Spinney, “Snakes In Suits”, *New Scientist* 21 August 2004: 40-43.

58. For a popular study on this theme, see Jon Ronson, *The Psychopath Test* (London: Picador, 2012).

59. Lindner 12.

60. See Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage, 1991), 26.

61. *The Presidential Papers*, 149.

62. *The Presidential Papers*, 192.

63. I mean “genealogy” here partly in the sense that Foucault derived from Nietzsche in “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”. For Foucault, Nietzschean genealogy



“opposes itself to the search for ‘origins’”. See *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin, 1991), 76-97. A Foucauldian critique of Mailer here might be that his account of modernity is predicated on the metaphysics of the fall: not only can it not be precisely historically located but it is also open to potentially indefinite regress and recursion. Does the fall inaugurate with the atom bomb and the holocaust, or can it be pushed back further towards the 19th century, or can it even be traced to Egyptian writing technologies, as Mailer suggests in *Ancient Evenings* (1983)?

64. *The Presidential Papers*, 201.

65. Ann Treneman, “Ruin more beautiful than the building”, *The Times* (London) 13 September 2001.

66. All quotes from *The Presidential Papers*, 191-192.

67. *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 156.

68. “Norman Mailer - Oh My America (Part 1 Farewell To The Fifties)”, *YouTube* 8 April 2013. Web. 21 June 2015.

69. Fetterley 159.

70. See Adam Curtis’ 2002 documentary for the BBC, *Century of the Self*, for more on Bernays.

71. James Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name* (London: Corgi, 1969), 173.

72. “We know the rancid humor of this too well, and any reader of *Advertisements for Myself* may enjoy the frantic dances of Norman Mailer as he strives to evade his own anxiety that it is, after all, Hemingway all the way”. Harold Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 28.

73. Schaub 146-149.

74. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 44.

75. In a discussion with Mailer for Canadian television, Marshall McLuhan argued that artists are often best placed to witness disorienting historical shifts in media: “the absolute indispensability of the artist is that he alone in the encounter with the present can give the pattern recognition”. “Norman Mailer and Marshall McLuhan Debating 1968”, *YouTube* 16 June 2012. Web. 5 October 2014.

76. Jameson, *Postmodernism* 44.

77. Jameson, *Postmodernism* 54.

78. Tabbi 3.

79. *Pieces and Pontifications*, 168.

80. Mailer’s white negro has always seemed an unlikely figure for critics, who

question the extent of the hipster's sociological authenticity. Does the hipster as presented in "The White Negro" belong to art (Mailer's romantic imagination) or life? For a number of critics, the hipster belongs firmly in the realm of myth or fiction. Joseph Wenke poses this as a question: "how precisely did the figure of the hipster and his violent, nihilistic philosophy generate for Mailer possibilities for character and narrative action that were not previously available to him?" (69). See also Robert Solotaroff, *Down Mailer's Way* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 89-92.

81. Stern's echoing of Mailer may or may not be coincidental. Substantial parts of the interview were rewritten by both men afterwards, including Stern's paragraph here, which is asterisked in the text. While the passage must be attributed to Stern, it's tempting to think that Mailer here is anticipating his later self-interviews on Picasso.

82. *The Return of the Real*, 76.

83. Cohen 26.

84. Cohen 72.

85. Cohen 26.

86. *Advertisements for Myself*, 166. From the short story "The Man Who Studied Yoga".



### Chapter 3. Mailer and the psychic nation: the sixties miscellanies

#### *Introduction: the Kennedy miscellanies and the psychic nation*

The presidency of John F Kennedy, and the events surrounding his assassination, casts a long shadow over Mailer's work. JFK is a spectral presence in the novel *An American Dream* (1965); *The Presidential Papers* (1963) is a collection addressed to Kennedy by "a court wit, an amateur advisor"<sup>1</sup>; the assassination is the culmination of the "Alpha" manuscript of Mailer's CIA novel *Harlot's Ghost* (1991); and *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (1995) tracks Kennedy's "lone gunman" in Minsk and America, and comes to see Oswald as a plausible assassin. The hold of Kennedy on Mailer's historical imagination of America in the Cold War is therefore extensive. However, underlying this historical fascination was a personal identification with JFK and the period of his presidency. In 1959, Mailer had declared that "he was running for president in the privacy of his mind"<sup>2</sup>. A year later, Mailer inextricably linked his own career with Kennedy's glamorous new era of politics.

Mailer first came out for Kennedy in a 1960 *Esquire* article "Superman Comes to the Supermarket". This was the first political convention Mailer had covered for a magazine, and was an overt "act of propaganda" (PP 74). Mailer saw Kennedy as an existential hero whose effect on the "national psyche" (39) would be profound: "that he was young, that he was physically handsome, and that his wife were attractive were not trifling accidental details, but rather, major new political facts" (38). An early example of the New Journalism, "Superman" marked Mailer's entry into the sixties and established for Mailer a persona as an anti-establishment version of *Esquire* man. Mailer's qualified political optimism aligned him with the glamorous new era of chic masculinity that Kennedy's candidacy had ushered in. This sense of optimism at Kennedy's stylised politics quickly soured; but it was Kennedy's assassination that was to produce a national trauma that was recreated, marked, analysed, dissected, sanctified and mourned in Mailer's fiction and essays. In a review of Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991), Mailer wrote that

“no afternoon in the recollection of our lives is equal to November 22, 1963, and in its aftermath we lost our innocence”<sup>3</sup>.

Stone’s *JFK* was part of a larger cultural reassessment of the Kennedy moment in the late eighties and early nineties in movies, fiction and popular culture<sup>4</sup>. In literature, *Harlot’s Ghost* and *Oswald’s Tale* were part of a trend that also included Don DeLillo’s *Libra* (1988). Mailer’s remarks on *JFK* reflect a sense, common to these works and to American culture in general, that the Kennedy assassination marked an important moment of historical rupture in the American sense of self. In retrospect, these works reflected a more general sense of inward reflection, and even paranoid suspicion, about American government towards the end of the Cold War. But this cultural moment was also fuelled by a pervasive feeling that the assassination and its surrounding interpretations and conspiracy theories had some inaugurating role in the era of postmodernity. *Oswald’s Tale* tellingly contains the only reference in all of Mailer’s major published writings to the postmodern or any of its cognate terms:

We have come at least to the philosophical crux of our inquiry: It would state that the sudden death of a man as large in his possibilities as John Fitzgerald Kennedy is more tolerable if we can perceive his killer as tragic rather than absurd. That is because absurdity corrodes our species. The mounting ordure of a post-modern media fling (where everything is equal to everything else) is all the ground we need for such an assertion.<sup>5</sup>

How does Mailer employ the term postmodern here? First of all, he is designating the post-Warren Commission report expansion of Kennedy assassination theories and their media dissemination. But he is also gesturing here towards a more fundamental theme of his work: his contestation of Hannah Arendt’s thesis of the “banality of evil”. If Mailer was to accept the idea of Oswald as a lone agent, he would have to view his violence as in some sense meaningful, or at least to attempt to “comprehend whether he was an assassin with a vision or a killer without one”<sup>6</sup>. If the latter were the case, then history could be seen as directionless and nihilistic.

Postmodern media's levelling of interpretations was, then, for Mailer a symptom of historical absurdity. The postmodernism of the Kennedy moment, however, is also to do with the reception of its iconic images: the Kennedy-Nixon debates; the Zapruder tapes; the live televised shooting of Jack Ruby. The controlled images of Kennedy's television presidency, with its *mélange* of stylised, packaged politics and celebrity glamour, would ultimately culminate in untamed and uncontrolled postmodern spectacle. And it is this preoccupation with spectacle that would be a defining concern of the sixties avant-garde. As Peter Wollen writes:

the arrival of pop art in the early sixties was just one element in a much more general shift: Warhol and Lichtenstein should be seen alongside cultural critics such as McLuhan (or Eco or Barthes), writers like Burroughs, obsessed by advertising, the image bank, the word virus, and the 'Reality Studios', and of course film-makers like Godard. Artists had to come to terms with the new images, whether through irony, celebration, aesthetic enhancement, or *détournement*.<sup>7</sup>

Alongside these artistic strategies, there was also an American critical and intellectual response to this "new sensibility". Thinkers such as Susan Sontag and Leslie Fiedler endorsed a more relaxed and relatively permissive attitude to aesthetic and generic boundaries: high and low art; fiction and reportage; art and science. Yet this strand of the new sensibility was also keenly conscious of the ethical limits and consequences of this aesthetic expansionism.<sup>8</sup> This consciousness would, over the years, emerge as an outright scepticism about what was perceived as an overproduction of mass cultural images. This apparent cultural conservatism might also be described as a form of conservationism: witness Mailer's revulsion at the "mounting ordure" of postmodern interpretations, or Sontag's call for an "ecology" of images in *On Photography*.<sup>9</sup> At its high point in the sixties, the new sensibility was a scandalous yet ultimately serious reconsideration of the place of art and the aesthetic consciousness within the broader culture of images.

In Mailer, the new sensibility intellectual appears as Jeremiaah, as moral and

political conscience.<sup>10</sup> “Superman Comes to the Supermarket” is not only an obvious reference to Kennedy, but also announces Mailer’s own arrival into mass-market journalism, with the modernist prophet recast as comic book superhero coming to the marketplace (there is a hint here of Yeats’s “The Second Coming”, a poem that will reverberate through Mailer’s work in the sixties<sup>11</sup>). The essay is virtually contemporary with Warhol’s pre-silkscreen Superman, exhibited along other early works in a famous display at New York’s Bonwit Teller department store in 1961.



**Fig. 8. Warhol’s Superman (1961)**

Warhol’s Superman can be read as a classic piece of Pop irony, a subversion of the bluster of the pose of the modernist hero proper.<sup>12</sup> Taken alongside Mailer’s own “Superman”, this is some indication that Mailer’s macho persona and Hemingway-esque poses were in cultural competition with the more dandy-ish aspects of sixties sensibility, gay or otherwise. One should bear in mind here Susan Sontag’s claim in “Notes on Camp” that the “two pioneering forces of modern sensibility are Jewish moral seriousness and homosexual aestheticism and irony”.<sup>13</sup> Sontag’s ambivalent relationship to camp is captured here, but this was also clear fault-line of sixties culture at large. There is some merit in taking Mailer and Warhol as two polar examples of “moral seriousness” and “aestheticism and irony” in sixties culture. Yet this distinction obscures

certain common preoccupations.

Mailer's interest in Pop first emerges in the collection *Cannibals and Christians*. The mid-sixties miscellanies are linked in this book by a larger "Argument" about the sixties avant-gardes which, while it is not stated as such, is in part a response to Sontag's essay.<sup>15</sup> The starting point for the Argument is a metal GULF sign a friend finds in a Provincetown dump, which Mailer considers turning into a fashionable coffee table:

*What a great deal intellectuals could do. There would be those to claim Pop art is the line where culture meets mass civilization, and so Pop art is the vehicle for bringing taste to the masses; others to argue the debauch of Capitalism has come to the point where it crosses the doorstep and inhabits the place where you set your drink. And those to say fun; fun is the salvation of society. It would go on: some might decide that putting a huge gasoline company's totem into one's private space helped to mock civilization and its hired man, the corporation; others would be certain the final victory of the corporation was near when we felt affection for the device by which a corporation advertised itself.<sup>15</sup>*

In essence, Mailer's portrait of sixties intellectual coffee table chatter examines a central faultline in Pop's critical reception, which has tended to swing between viewing Pop as celebratory or critical of consumer culture.<sup>16</sup> Mailer's Argument, with its language of plague, waste and cancer, is an apocalyptic variant on a standard intellectual line on Pop and the other "arts of the absurd".<sup>17</sup> But Mailer also recognised in Pop a radical potential: Pop's corrosive irony in Mailer's view was often turned against the very corporate culture it seemed to appropriate. Mailer once called Warhol the "maggot genius of American culture"<sup>18</sup>, but he also at times consciously adopted Warholian aesthetics. Warhol's experimentalism and versatility in differing media and genres paralleled Mailer's own artistic practice, and sometimes directly influenced it, particularly his late sixties film-making. Mailer, like Warhol, is an archetype of the sixties Renaissance man.<sup>19</sup>

Mailer was also interested artistically in what we now think of as the Warholsphere: Kennedy, Monroe and the decade's other iconic images of trauma. And there is, I will argue, a link between Mailer's "existentialist" themes of death and violence and



Warholian Pop. Foster's reading of Warhol's "traumatic realism" offers some suggestive clues here. Foster's starting point is to note a link between Warhol's "Pop" images of stars and icons (Marilyn Monroe; the grieving Jackie Kennedy) and his darker images of car crashes and electric chairs in the *Death in America* series. Foster begins by addressing readings of Warhol that point to him as primarily an artist of simulacra. These readings point to these works' lack of affect or referent, their banal irony, and their emphasis on surface. However, borrowing a term from Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, Foster notes a traumatic *punctum* in Warhol's silk screens at those points where "the real ruptures the screen of representation". This *punctum* often emerges from the content of the image, but Foster also shows that Warhol's work also registers these moments of trauma by a number of aesthetic means, including complex strategies of repetition and serialisation. Lurking behind these images and fantasy projections of sixties America, Foster argues, lies a Warholian mass traumatic subject: .

in its guise as witness the mass subject reveals its sadomasochistic aspect, for this subject is often split in relation to a disaster: even as he or she may mourn the victims, even identify with them masochistically, he or she may also be thrilled, sadistically, that there are victims of whom he or she is not one. (There is a triumphalism of the survivor that the trauma of the witness does not cancel out). Paradoxically, perhaps, this sadomasochistic aspect helps the mass subject cohere as a collectivity. For the death of the old body politic did not only issue in the return of the total leader or the rise of the spectacular star; it also led to the birth of the psychic nation, that is, to a mass-mediated polis that is not only convoked around calamitous events (like the Rodney King beating or the Oklahoma City bombing) but also addressed, polled and reported as a traumatic subject (the generations that share the JFK assassination, the Vietnam war, and so on).<sup>21</sup>

Foster's account of trauma clearly corresponds with themes we have already detected in Mailer's work. The presence of a split traumatic subject, we have seen, can be traced back as early as *Barbary Shore's* Mickey Lovett. This was further developed in "The White Negro", where a combination of post-nuclear *jouissance* and terror supplied a

backdrop both for counter-cultural rebellion, and a more general emphasis on violence in American life. What is new in “Superman Comes to the Supermarket” (which can be reread as “the rise of the spectacular star”) is that Mailer explicitly begins to think of America in terms of the model of the “psychic nation”. This motif would begin to take greater prominence in the wake of the Kennedy assassination, and extended into the deepening of the Vietnam conflict in works such as *Armies of the Night* (1968) and *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968). As the sixties developed, Mailer’s work depicts an America increasingly riven by internal contradiction, discord, and violence. Behind the new political and cultural formations of the sixties, Mailer believed, was a re-emergence of an old, fundamental divide in the American psyche, a nation he saw as composed of “cannibals” and “christians”. This national subject can, at least in part, be identified with Foster’s reading of the mass subject of the media (a “cannibal” sadistic aggression sitting alongside a “christian” identification with suffering).<sup>21</sup>

The psychic nation is the subject of Mailer’s Kennedy-era serial novel *An American Dream* (1965), a novel as implicated in sixties’ iconography’s fascination with violence and disaster as the *Death in America* series.<sup>22</sup> The Kennedy assassination occurred soon after the novel had started to be serialised in *Esquire*, and Mailer later recalled being disturbed by the uncanny relation between fiction and event:

Less than eight weeks before the assassination, work was begun on *An American Dream*. The name of the formal villain in that novel comes up on the first page. It is Kelly – Barney Oswald Kelly. If psychic coincidences give pleasure to some I do not know if they give them to me.<sup>23</sup>

*An American Dream* was initially conceived of and published as a serial novel to be published in eight instalments in *Esquire* to tight monthly deadlines. This plan, however, would quickly be caught up in the kaleidoscopic hyperreality of the news cycle after the shock of the assassination in November 1963. One standard reading of the sixties and the rise of the non-fiction novel is that reality itself was taking on the texture of narrative fiction. But something slightly different is happening in *An American Dream*’s

magical realism. What is interesting here is the uncanny *prediction* of events by fiction, and how those events in turn influenced the fiction as monthly spectacle in *Esquire*.

*An American Dream* is a fiction that enacts Mailer's anxieties not just about his own work (he had not published any long fiction since *The Deer Park*) but about the death of the American novel in general, anxieties that were clearly linked to the rise of the new media. The publishing history of *An American Dream* also indicates that a collision between fact and fiction can be felt as traumatic. Foster, writing about the short chapter on "Death" from *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*, defines trauma in Lacanian terms as "an encounter where one misses the real, where one is too early or too late (precisely 'not around', 'not prepared') but where one is somehow marked by this very missed encounter".<sup>25</sup> There is a similar "disorientation of time and space" in Mailer's remarks about *An American Dream*, a feeling that the novel is "too early" for the event. But it is not quite right to say that Mailer "misses" the real here, so much as he *anticipates* it; and it is this anticipation that is the source of the sense of the shock. In this sense, Mailer's inclusion of the dates and location of the novel's composition (Provincetown, New York, September 1963-October 1964) in the 1965 Dial Press edition can be read as an attempt to transform temporal "disorientation" into stable chronology, to displace shock into the elegiac registers of mourning.

What is being unmasked here is in fact merely the flip side to Mailer's "narcissism". Earlier in the decade, Mailer speculated that his own "Superman Comes to the Supermarket" may have had a subtle but decisive influence on Kennedy's narrow election victory. This is indeed "narcissistic" in its supreme belief in authorial powers (Mailer is clearly as "guilty" of self-regard as his detractors claim). However, it also reflects Mailer's serious conviction of the writer's capacity to "influence" and "bend" contemporary reality through his work. Also at play, however, is a more curious aspect of Mailer's work, a belief in magical thinking and in animistic connections between writing and history. Mailer writes about this in a generally overlooked area of his sixties miscellanies, his *Commentary* articles on Martin Buber's *Tales of the Hasidim*. Written in the

wake of the Eichmann trial, the *Commentary* articles, when discussed at all, are usually regarded as an esoteric blend of Jewish mysticism<sup>25</sup>, existentialism, and psychoanalysis. These pieces nevertheless give vital clues as to how Mailer conceives of the form of the historical imagination. In one of these commentaries, Mailer interprets a Hasidic tale about the upsetting of a soup bowl in historical terms: “A magical action in one part of the world creates its historical action in another – we are dealing with no less than totem and taboo”.<sup>26</sup> Mailer’s allusion here is to Freud’s application of psychoanalysis to the field of anthropology, *Totem and Taboo* (1913). In that work, Freud viewed the totemistic, magical thinking of primitive societies as symptoms of a narcissistic “omnipotence of thoughts”.<sup>28</sup> According to Freud, both children and neurotic patients often also display a similar over-valuation of psychic effects on external reality. What is striking about Mailer’s imaginative engagement with these Freudian themes is his major investment, *contra* Freud, in magical thinking, in taboo as an aspect of the real, and in a “psychic” relationship to history.

What goes against the standard account of Mailer as arch-narcissist is the sense that there is something distinctly “spooky” about this kind of historical thinking. His remarks on *An American Dream* and the Kennedy assassination show Mailer’s “narcissism” at its least confident and outspoken: “if psychic coincidences give pleasure to some I do not know if they give them to me”. A potential psychic relationship to reality is treated here with considerable ambivalence. This disavowal of narcissistic “pleasure” hints at the subject “split in relation to a disaster” noted by Foster. This ambivalence, moreover, might also be read as an inverted image of the split attitude to violence that first came to light in Mailer’s work in “The White Negro”. In that essay, Mailer offered a double-edged reading of what he saw as the increasing presence in American life of psychopathy (itself an extreme variation on narcissism proper), and of the potentially liberating effects of violence. This chapter will seek to explore more fully how such ambiguities in Mailer’s account of American violence merges, in his sixties work, with the Warholian mass subject of the silkscreens. It is essential at this point to

delve deeper into Mailer's exploration of the subjectivity and aesthetics of violence.

*"The aesthetics of bombing"*

In a 1962 *Impolite* Interview with Paul Krassner, Mailer explained the "obsession" with violence that became an overt theme of his work at the time of "The White Negro". In a discussion of "the aesthetics of bombing", Mailer drew on the historical example of the fascist bombing campaigns of Ethiopia in 1935.<sup>28</sup> Mailer's example was typically contentious: the Italian fascists' notorious description of the resemblance between a bomb-cloud and a rose<sup>29</sup>:

I disapprove of bombing a city. I disapprove of the kind of man who will derive aesthetic satisfaction from the fact that an Ethiopian village looks like a red rose at the moment the bombs are exploding. I won't disapprove of the act of perception which witnesses that; I think that act of perception is – I'm going to use the word again – noble.

What I'm getting at is: a native village is bombed, and the bombs happen to be beautiful when they land; in fact it would be odd if all that sudden destruction did not liberate some beauty. The form a bomb takes in its explosion may be in part a picture of the potentialities it destroyed. So let us accept the idea that the bomb is beautiful [...]

Think of a young pilot who comes along later, some young pilot who goes out on a mission and isn't prepared for the fact that a bombing might be beautiful; he could conceivably be an idealist, there were some in the war against Fascism. If the pilot is totally unprepared he might never get over the fact that he was particularly thrilled by the beauty of that bomb.<sup>30</sup>

The key assumption that Mailer makes here is that the perception of a falling bomb as beautiful is *not* a product of fascist ideology, but an "absolute" perceptual phenomenon.

Mailer makes his case by shifting from a fascist mindset to an idealistic liberal one.

This is a characteristic Mailer move, and while it is provocative, it is not gratuitously so. One of his great strengths as a novelist is a certain mobility of identification, a willingness to migrate between subjective experiences, both to elucidate distinctions (here, between aesthetic "perception" and "satisfaction") and to report hidden affinities between self and the other. What unites the fascist and anti-fascist bomber in Mailer's

view is a certain thrill at the bombing's sublime force of "sudden destruction". But it is only the fascist consciousness that takes over "aesthetic satisfaction" in bombing. In our everyday "perception", ethics doesn't always fully override aesthetics. In Mailer's example, it is the illicit thrill of the bomb's beauty for which Mailer's idealistic young pilot is "unprepared". This sense of shock is clearly signposted by a dissociation between the act and its witnessing. There is an element of cognitive dissonance here that can be attributed to the matrix of technology, narcissism, and guilt that is at the heart of modernity for Mailer. In Mailer's view, "you can't walk away" from an aesthetic aspect to bombing because "it helps to explain why bombing pilots could do the things that they did".<sup>31</sup>

Mailer is here, remember, making a point about the ethics of *artistic* perception, and in particular his attitude to his own fictional characters. Acts of facing are for Mailer at the heart of a fundamentally ethical conception of the purpose of fiction: novelists (and their readers) can explore in fiction ideas that are on their face ethically repulsive. Mailer's point in the "Impolite Interview" as respects this as an artistic attitude, however, is that ethical revulsion is a necessary yet insufficient standpoint for the writer to fully engage these aspects of human experience. For Mailer, there must always be a small but significant investment (an approval of certain kinds of violence; a minimum of psychological identification) in the creation of an artwork. An art of "facing" entails the confrontation of what Richard Poirier has called "the minority within"<sup>32</sup>, the most submerged and disavowed elements of feeling. This frequently asks a lot of readers, and as we shall see in the next chapter these identifications can be tangled. But it is precisely these illicit identifications that Mailer believes fiction is uniquely fitted to explore.

Mailer's anti-fascist pilot is clearly also a proxy for the "sadomasochistic" collective traumatic subject of the sixties, which for Foster is "split in relation to a disaster". To illustrate this, we can turn to a more recent revival of the politics of the aesthetic: the terrorist attacks on New York's twin towers on September 11, 2001. Mailer's post 9/11 writings, collected in *Why Are We At War?* (2003), return to the themes of the

national psyche explored in the sixties miscellanies. The impact of the destruction of the twin towers was, Mailer thought, a rare “shock” of the real in the media landscape, comparable to the images of the Kennedy era:

The one thing TV always promises us is that, deep down, what we see on television is not real. It's why there's always that subtle numbness to TV. The most astonishing events, even terrifying events, nonetheless have a touch of non-existence when seen on the tube. They don't terrify us. We see something that's hideous, but we're not shocked proportionally. It's why we can watch anything on TV.

Now, there are exceptions. The shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald by Jack Ruby was one; the second plane striking the second Tower; the collapse of the Towers. TV at that moment was no longer a coat of insulation between us and the horrific. When broken, the impact is enormous.<sup>33</sup>

Mailer's political observations of the post-9/11 world are underwritten by this ethical engagement with the aesthetics of mourning and violence.<sup>34</sup> *Why Are We At War?* depicts a national “mass identity crisis” and its patriotic response, part of which included an anti-intellectual backlash in which, as Judith Butler noted, “anyone who sought to understand the ‘reasons’ for the attack on the United States was regarded as someone who sought to ‘exonerate’ those who conducted that attack”.<sup>35</sup> Mailer's own comments were caught up in that backlash, but what is significant in his remarks is his return to the Kennedy moment. The destruction of the towers was a rare moment when the real bursts through the television screen. What distinguishes 9/11 from the Kennedy images was that this was a global rather than a simply American or national rupture: for philosophers like Butler (and also for Sontag in her last book in 2003, *Regarding the Pain of Others*), the question of globalisation, affect and the image was to become theoretically central in the aftermath of the attack on the twin towers. These were themes that Mailer was also to turn to, albeit more provisionally, in *Why Are We At War?*

Globalisation was also a subject at the heart of the sixties debates about the society of the spectacle. Marshall McLuhan argued that the new media were essentially

extensions of the human sensorium: the media subject, largely in the West, lived in a new environment that McLuhan called the “electronic envelope”. In a 1968 programme for Canadian television, Mailer debated these issues with McLuhan. Their differences are instructive. McLuhan took a “cool” approach to this new sensorium: the inhabitant of the global village would be able to obtain a richer sense of other cultures than had previously been possible in human history. But if for McLuhan the electronic envelope prosthetically extends the human body, for Mailer it is radically alienating:

Mailer: The nature of the alienated man is he always contains opposed notions of himself at the same time, and therefore the only actions which can define his nature are precisely not field actions, not actions in relation to an environment which is controlled from without. He cannot define himself in any environment which has been programmed for him. He can only define himself by getting into situations which are brand new for him, because when he is in a situation that is brand new for him his obsessions can cease for a moment. He can stop thinking of himself for that one moment as either this or that, because he can only be one thing at the moment. In other words, if a man is jumping off a burning building into a fireman’s net, that is a profoundly existential situation because he doesn’t know how it’s going to turn out.

McLuhan: Would you say that was a valuable moment of experience?

Mailer: Probably at that point it was the most valuable moment in his whole life.

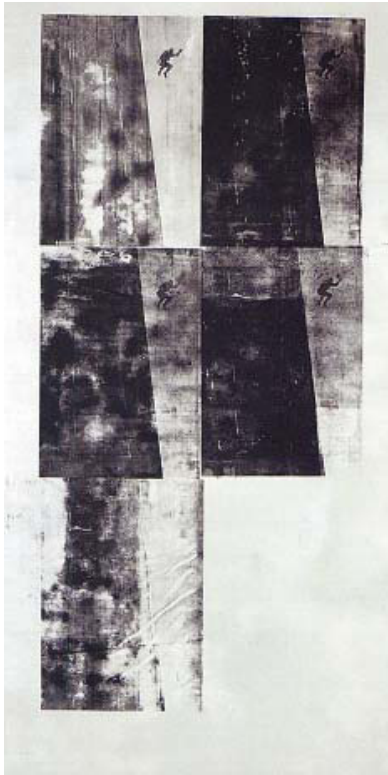
McLuhan: He has no time to evaluate it.<sup>36</sup>

The programmed environment represents for Mailer the total problem of modern life: the alienation of the senses through processes of abstraction, distancing and insulation. One of the results of this for him is a kind of reality hunger, an appetite for the instinctual and rebellious. For the aggressive cannibal self, desensitisation ultimately finds an outlet in violent desublimation. As insulated Christians, on the other hand, in moments when the real breaks the screen the shock is especially traumatic since we are collectively unprepared. But there is for Mailer also a third solution. What if a directly traumatic experience, like his example of a man jumping off a burning roof, can also be liberating? The hugely significant moments for him are those “moments of great



danger or great love” which override or flood our everyday defenses and ambivalences: “A dramatic encounter with death, an automobile accident from which I escape, a violent fight I win or lose decently, these call forth my crossed impulses which love death and fear it”.<sup>38</sup> Primitive emotion, Mailer wants to suggest, can create new kinds of perception and new kinds of self, although the value of these encounters for good or bad can never be decided in advance. But Mailer is clear that there is always a *potential* creative or curative value in traumatic experience, and even in some kinds of violent action.

This is the gambit on human nature that Mailer first announced in “The White Negro”, and it is one that critics rightly treat with extreme care. *An American Dream*, as we shall see in the next chapter, is a novel about the traumas of the psychic nation



**Fig. 9. Andy Warhol, *Suicide (Silver Jumping Man)* (1963)**

that is also an ambiguous and ambivalent negotiation of the psychotic episode where Mailer stabbed his second wife Adele. But Mailer’s examples of the jumping man and the automobile crash also evoke the subject matter of Warhol’s *Death in America* series. It’s true that Warhol and Mailer treat these subjects rather differently. Warhol’s silver suicides are among his most haunting and opaque works, which took on a further prophetic resonance after the collapse of the twin towers.<sup>39</sup> Warhol appropriated media images of anonymous real life suicides, and further mediated the images through the famous silkscreening technique (some of these images are silhouetted in a way that predicts Warhol’s late shadows paintings).

Mailer, by contrast, is interested in the direct and *unmediated* encounter, as well as the *survived* encounter. An encounter is not the same thing as a confrontation in the sense of mastery (on the contrary, such attempts at mastery are often a defense from shock).<sup>40</sup>

The true value of a survived encounter is when the experience defeats the training we have received from our environment: these are exactly the kinds of experience for which we *cannot* prepare.

*The encounter with the real: an art of facing*

The dramatic encounter with reality corresponds for Mailer to the passionate encounter with the modernist work of art. The key artist for Mailer here is not Warhol, but Picasso. Here we can turn to another neglected strand of the sixties miscellanies, the series of mock-Socratic “interviews” that were originally composed as prefatory notes to a planned, and long abandoned, book on Picasso. The dialogues are the closest Mailer gets to an aesthetic theory of his work. The best of them is “The Metaphysics of the Belly”, an allegorical exploration of the body’s processes of consumption and excretion:

Mailer: Feces are seen as the most distasteful and despised condition of being. They are precisely that part of the alimentation in the universe which we have rejected, and, mind you, rejected not morally, not emotionally, not passionately...  
Interviewer: In the sense that vomit is passionate?  
Mailer: In the sense that vomit is passionate. No, feces have been rejected viscerally.<sup>41</sup>

Bodily processes are directly related by Mailer to the aesthetics of the avant-garde. Aside from Picasso, the examples Mailer cites are John Cage, the abstract expressionists and surrealism. Perhaps the key fictional figure here is William Burroughs. Mailer was a major champion of *Naked Lunch*, a novel that clearly connected with his own alimentary concerns and which influenced the surrealism of *An American Dream*. Modern art was for Mailer profoundly a scatological art, in a sense that had to do with primarily psychological and formal expulsion.

Modern art is scatological for Mailer because its imaginative form and materials consists of “viscerally” rejected elements of consciousness. Mailer calls this “formless form”. Formlessness is usually at odds with the harmony of classical aesthetic forms

such as Greek sculpture.<sup>43</sup> These ideas of formal beauty are no longer sufficient in the modern to count as realism:

the modern condition may be psychically so bleak, so over-extended, so artificial, so plastic – plastic like styrene – that studies of loneliness, silence, corruption, scatology, abortion, monstrosity, decadence, orgy, and death can give life, can give a sentiment of beauty.<sup>42</sup>

Forms for Mailer reveal the nature not only of objects, but of people and societies. The nature of contemporary America for him is revealed in the form of the automobile or in the style of interchangeable architecture he calls “hospital modern”.<sup>43</sup> The modern built environment for Mailer, as for his English contemporary JG Ballard, is essentially anti-aesthetic, “plastic like styrene”. In these circumstances, expulsive modernist art can provide a kind of beauty which, in the terms of post-Kantian aesthetic theory might be better described as sublime. Themes of waste, scatology and anality are bound up here with an imagination of social and cultural forms of the sublime: death, disaster, the traumatic, “the horrific” and the “absolute”. Modern art, in other words, is intimately bound up with the encounter with the real. But how exactly does Mailer’s body politics relate to avant-garde practice?

In the history of anthropological and social sciences, “the body is the most ubiquitous, natural and [...] ready-to-hand source of allegories of order and disorder”.<sup>44</sup> There has been a persistent dialogue and exchange between these anthropological and sociological excursions on the body and the avant-garde. A key point of intersection for these discourses is the writings of the French surrealist philosopher and writer Georges Bataille. Bataille was not widely known in America during the time Mailer was writing (although Norman O. Brown, whose work has many affinities with Bataille, was). There are, however, affinities between Mailer’s excremental vision and Bataille’s visions of excess. “The White Negro”’s radical manifesto of violent liberation, for example, shares some of the key hallmarks of Bataille’s romantic primitivism. Aside from a number of common interests such as Picasso and bullfighting, their affinity can concretely be

understood in terms of the historical genealogy of an avant-garde widely preoccupied with the experience of Fascism; Bataille as it emerges in Europe, and Mailer in America in the wake of European experience. Bataille's early formative work appeared in the late twenties and thirties at the same time as the emergence of Fascism in Europe, and his surrealist hostility to totalising systems is part of this larger political critique. Pejoratively described by Andre Breton as an "excremental philosopher", increasing attention has been paid in recent years to Bataille's "sub" form of surrealism and its wide influence on art history and literary theory. Bataille is now viewed, by Hal Foster and Rosalind Krauss among others, as a foundational figure in the evolving concept of "the real" in the twentieth century avant-garde.<sup>45</sup>

Bataille's writings consist of a sustained critique of Western rationalism and capitalist modernity. His work specifically engages Western philosophical tradition, the tendency of which he sees as fundamentally idealist. This idealising tendency is viewed as an "immense movement from earth to sky"<sup>46</sup> as exhibited in representations of the flower. This tendency, for Bataille, has buried the essential materiality of human nature. Classical models of ideal beauty are for Bataille forever put into question by "base" nature (in the double sense of immoral and material, but with the sense of the Marxist economic base also operative). Bataille notes in Western thought "two polarised human impulses: EXCRETION and APPROPRIATION" (94). These are explicitly allegorised in terms of practices of consumption and waste in the human body. Western thought's appropriation of the "accursed share" (the primitive and material) in human societies is replicated for Bataille in capitalist modernity's desublimated forms of productive activity. Bataille contrasts capitalism's system of exchange with the non-utilitarian forms of expenditure (*potlatch*) characteristic of primitive gift economies.

Bataille regards primitive economy as predicated on free, reciprocal and non-productive expenditure. Bataille defines such non-productive expenditure as follows: "luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts [...] – all these represent activities which, at least in primitive

circumstances, have no end beyond themselves” (118). Remnants of such primitive attitudes to the body and to social experience can be found in rational modernity, but for Bataille these remnants are not benign. The “at least in primitive circumstances” gives the game away that Bataille is tacitly thinking here of the fascist spectacles of the thirties. Fascist society, for Bataille, depends upon the kind of sumptuary display characteristic of gift societies, but the aims of such expenditure are essentially repressive, a means of glorifying a homogeneous and hierarchical political order. Furthermore, Bataille saw the expulsion of “unassimilable elements” as central to a psychological critique of a fascism that would ultimately terminate in the concentration camps.

The first chapter of this study drew on Bataille’s “The Psychological Structure of Fascism” to suggest that the structure of the army, analogous to the structure of the totalitarian nation state, secured its homogeneity by its negation of heterogeneous elements: in that case the enlisted soldiers. This “fascist” psychological structure is clearly present in Mailer’s Sergeant Croft, who claims to “HATE EVERYTHING WHICH IS NOT IN MYSELF”.<sup>47</sup> But *The Naked and the Dead* more generally can be understood in terms of a materialist poetics, for which a discussion of Bataille is relevant. Mailer’s supposed deviation from the naturalism of his first novel has been key to the reception of his work. *The Naked and the Dead* was almost entirely received in the context of the American realist-naturalist tradition to which it in an important sense obviously belonged. *Partisan Review* intellectuals, as they later confessed, initially overlooked the popular success of the novel because it lay outwith the modernist-symbolist tradition that was central to their idea of serious artistic value.<sup>48</sup> This schism replayed the literary situation during Mailer’s formative years at Harvard, which in the early forties was divided between proponents of a rugged realism and a more aestheticised modernism. Mailer was associated with the former group, but was reading in both traditions. Significantly, however, he read *Ulysses* in naturalist rather than symbolist terms, focusing on its imaginative treatment of the body and its functions.<sup>49</sup>

Reading Mailer in terms of a bodily modernism suggests a point of continuity between his early naturalism and his later development into the surrealism of *An American Dream*. Common to both is the imaginative deployment of material imagery (obscenities, excrement, the body both naked and dead). Yet the largely naturalistic detail of the early work gradually shifts into the more overtly allegorical and psychological employment of the material body in the later fiction.

As well as sharing a certain materialism, Bataille and Mailer are both interested in the aesthetics of form and formlessness (in French, *informe*). Bataille also contrasts the deformity of modernist art with the idealised harmony of classical aesthetics, and he is also for this reason interested in monstrosity. The “incongruity” of monsters and freaks is an index for Bataille to the essentially deviant, unharmonious, non-geometric and material “beauty” of “any given human individual”. Citing Francis Galton’s experiments in composite photography, Bataille writes:

twenty mediocre faces constitute a beautiful face, and one obtains without difficulty faces whose proportions are very nearly those of the Hermes of Praxiteles. The composite image would thus give a kind of reality to the necessarily beautiful Platonic ideal. At the same time, beauty would be at the mercy of a definition as classical as that of the common measure. But each individual form escapes this common measure and is, to a certain degree, a monster.<sup>50</sup>

Something like Bataille’s anti-idealist interest in the face and bodily form can be found in Mailer’s work as early as *A Transit to Narcissus*, where ideas of traumatic identity are associated with the female nudes of the French sculptor Maillol, a contemporary of Picasso’s. But *informe* does not only mean deformity in this sense of unharmoniousness or the non-idealised. According to Rosalind Krauss, Bataille’s *informe* is “not simply mess or slime. Its cancellation of boundaries is more structural than that since it involves a voiding of categories”.<sup>51</sup> For Bataille, the categorical impulse in philosophy assumes its coherence by the expulsion of heterogeneous elements which cannot be appropriated into system or concept (this aspect of Bataille’s thought is avowedly anti-Kantian).

*Informe* is threatening not only for its anti-idealist fascination with the forms of art and nature, or its psychoanalytical role in states of abjection. It is a kind of categorical transgression, which Krauss views as both social and deconstructive.<sup>52</sup>

Mailer's discussion of the nature of beauty and time in "Metaphysics of the Belly" engages this precise categorical notion of transgression: "Most people keep concepts firmly in category".<sup>53</sup> A transgression of category of this sort is involved in Vittorio Mussolini's description of the resemblance between an exploding bomb and a red rose: the traditional symbol of beauty and love is linked formally with the "horrific". Part of Mailer's point is that the categorical confusion of the beautiful with the violent is in itself traumatic. This traumatic aspect to "formless", and its links to the aesthetics of the psychic nation, can be clearly seen when we compare "The Impolite Interview" to Warhol's Pop Superman. Earlier we had read this work as a wry critique on modernist heroism: "Good! A mighty puff of my super breath extinguishes the forest fire!". However, on closer inspection, a connection with Mailer's aesthetics of bombing becomes more apparent. Just as Mailer explores the formal resemblance of bomb and red rose, in Warhol's painting there is a morphological interest in the formlessness of the forest fire. But while the position of Mailer's pilot is one of aerial shock, in Warhol there is a ironised heroic mastery of threatening form.

"The Metaphysics of the Belly" and the other Picasso self-dialogues were written in the same period as the Kennedy miscellanies, just when the theme of the national psyche was beginning to take primacy in his work. The formless aesthetics of these dialogues elsewhere manifests itself in a preoccupation with what Foster, citing Bataille, calls "the real that lies below"<sup>54</sup> postmodern spectacle. A further echo of Bataille can be felt in Mailer's hostility to postmodernity's "mounting ordure" of images and interpretations. The key fiction of this period is *An American Dream*, a novel which is fundamentally preoccupied with form and excess. Three provisional paradigms from Bataille might be usefully applied to *An American Dream*: the body, the unconscious and the social.



First, Bataille describes the heterogeneity of the body as including “the waste products of the human body and certain analogous matter (trash vermin, etc)”; “the parts of the body”; and “persons, words, or acts having a suggestive erotic value” (142). Mailer’s fictional preoccupation with the body and the language of the body, as we have seen, can be traced as early as *The Naked and the Dead*. What is marked in *An American Dream*, however, is the allegorical, and even theodical, treatment of themes of waste, disorder and anality that can also be found in the Picasso dialogues. Mailer frequently cites in this respect an early Christian phrase that was also a favourite of Bataille’s: *inter faeces et urinam nascimur* (“between piss and shit are we born”).<sup>55</sup> The aesthetic correlative of Mailer’s focus on our material origins (defecation and reproduction; life and death) is his fictional compulsion towards linguistic excess; images of waste, destruction, violence; and pungent reproductions of olfactory experience.

The second paradigm of the heterogeneous I take from Bataille are “the various unconscious processes such as dreams or neuroses” (142). Formally, *An American Dream* is neither purely naturalistic in its imagery nor realistic in its narrative mode. Instead, its exploration of private and national consciousness is achieved through its use of dream symbolism, and its detailed rendering of extreme conditions of subjective experience. Third is the novel’s status as a *social* fiction. *The Naked and the Dead*, as I have argued, largely operated within the class paradigms of social realism, albeit in a militarised setting. However, in the fifties and sixties the social purview of Mailer’s fiction shifts towards what Bataille calls

the numerous elements or social forms that homogeneous society is powerless to assimilate: mobs, the warrior, aristocratic and impoverished classes, different types of violent individuals or at least those who refuse the rule (madmen, leaders, poets, etc). (142).

“The White Negro” is an obvious starting point here, but what is interesting is how this preoccupation with the hip over the square becomes spectacularised. Mailer’s social interests, like Warhol’s, gravitate towards studies of leaders, stars, sportsmen and various areas of subculture and criminality. This is Bataille as seen through the lens of Pop.



But where Warhol's work is fascinated with the glamorous images and surfaces of postmodern society (and its underlying preoccupation with death), Mailer is dedicated to exploring its primitive unconscious.

Bataille's ethnographic project to trace parallels between modern and primitive societies is particularly relevant in this respect. By "Superman Comes to the Supermarket", the Fascist "total leader" of Bataille's work has been supplanted by the "spectacular star" of liberal consumer capitalism. Kennedy's presidency, mythologised as the medieval court of Camelot, was a democratic leader cult founded on "luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts". This sounds very like the sixties society of the spectacle, the era of Vietnam and the moon landings. Mailer regarded Kennedy as a "moderate liberal in program but a romantic figure in image"<sup>55</sup>, a technocrat who nevertheless spoke directly to the national unconscious. In *Advertisements for Myself*, Mailer included extracts from a work intended towards a psychology of the orgy, and while this remained ultimately unrealised, his miscellaneous works of the period essentially look to such a primitivist psychology. *An American Dream* is the fullest fictional treatment of Mailer's vision of an America gone "ape". It is also a fiction that Mailer characterised as a "novel of manners".

1. *The Presidential Papers*, 11. Citations are hereafter bracketed in the text with the abbreviation PP.

2. *Advertisements for Myself*, 17.

3. Quoted in Glenday 99.

4. That reassessment took countercultural forms (say in the politically conspiratorial comedy of Bill Hicks), but it also took on the forms of postmodern irony in sitcoms like *Seinfeld*.

5. *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (1995; London: Abacus, 1996), 198.
6. *Oswald's Tale*, 198. *Oswald's Tale* is in this sense a companion piece to *The Executioner's Song*, which considers both the banality and remarkableness of Gary Gilmore. In chapter 7, I discuss this postmodernist aspect of *The Executioner's Song*. Mailer's consideration of the tragic-absurd potential of evil is a major faultline in his work. But it also led to tragedy in the Jack Henry Abbot case, in which Mailer played a widely criticised role. See the conclusion to this study.
7. Peter Wollen, *Raiding the Icebox* (London: Verso, 1993), 158.
8. See Mailer's "An End to Obscenity", where he discussed the gains won around obscenity in art and culture, but also began to express reservations about their expansion. See *The Essential Mailer* (London: NEL, 1983), 459-462. See also Susan Sontag's ambivalence in "Notes on Camp": "I am strongly drawn to Camp, and almost as strongly offended by it". *Against Interpretation*, 276.
9. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 180.
10. See George P. Landow, *Elegant Jeremiahs: The Sage from Carlyle to Mailer* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1986).
11. "The Second Coming" was a virtual anthem of the apocalyptic sixties. There are repeated echoes of the poem in Mailer's sixties work, notably this passage from *Cannibals and Christians*: "America went ape, and the motorcycles began to roar like lions across the land and all the beasts of all the buried history of America turned in their circuit and prepared to slink towards the marketplace" (*Cannibals and Christians*, 129). See also Joan Didion's *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968) and Morris Dickstein's description of the sixties as the "second coming of modernism" in *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York; London: Liveright, 2015), 94.
12. Lichtenstein's *Popeye* has been interpreted as "an allegory of the new Pop hero taking the tough Abstract Expressionist to the canvas with a single blow" (*Art Since 1900*, 448). Pop Art often sought to deflate or critique the machismo of abstract expressionism and American culture more widely, through both form and content. This was not exclusively a matter for gay Pop artists, but it is true that this was often a gay critique of the heterosexual modernist hero. Gavin Butt has pointed to "the power and currency of a feminized, if not homosexual, image of the artist in the social imaginary of the abstract expressionist art community. This was an image which, as performative theorist Judith Butler might argue, needed to be abjected as part of the process of establishing a heterosexual artistic identity, in particular the cowboy machismo so dear to de Kooning and Pollock". *Between You and Me: Queer Disclosures in the New York Art World, 1948-1963* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 48.
13. Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 290.
14. Sontag's distinction between moral seriousness and Camp plays a central role in "The Argument". These tendencies were exemplified in the American novel for Mailer by Bellow's *Herzog* and Terry Southern's *Candy* (*Cannibals and Christians*, 126).

15. *Cannibals and Christians*, 15. Italics in original.
16. Foster writes “Can we read the ‘Death in America’ images as referential and simulacral, connected and disconnected, affective and affectless, critical and complacent?”. Foster’s “traumatic realism” is for him a way of reconciling these paired oppositions that relay throughout Warhol’s reception. See *Who is Andy Warhol?*, 119. The pair celebratory-critical is one such opposition in Pop which Mailer is exploring here. The German critic Rainer Crone’s early book on Warhol advances an early argument that Warhol’s work was essentially a critique of consumer capitalism. *Andy Warhol* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1970). Yet, as Mailer and others suggest, reading Pop as a critical practice is a difficult position to thoroughly sustain.
17. *Cannibals and Christians*, 15.
18. “Mailer Meets Madonna”, *Esquire* September 1994: 59.
19. See Peter Wollen, “Andy Warhol: Renaissance Man” in *Who is Andy Warhol?*, 11-15. Mailer once explained his experiments in short stories as attempts “to keep Renaissance man alive” (*The Essential Mailer*, 8).
20. *Who is Andy Warhol?*, 123-124.
21. Mailer also characterises this cannibal/christian psyche (a clear analogue to the frontiersman and the puritan) as related to the American spirit of capitalist accumulation: “To be a mainstream American is to live as an oxymoron. You are a good Christian, but you strain to remain dynamically competitive”. *Why Are We At War* (New York: Random House, 2003), 46.
22. Frank McConnell has argues that the novel is “intimately related to the [Kennedy] assassination and its aftermath – for the ‘dream’ is of violence, murder, vengeance, and rape”. Quoted in Glenday 89.
23. *Cannibals and Christians*, 207.
24. *Who is Andy Warhol?*, 117.
25. See Leslie A. Fiedler, *Waiting for the End: The American Literary Scene from Hemingway to Baldwin* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1967), 113.
26. *The Presidential Papers*, 167-168.
27. See Sigmund Freud, *The Origins of Religion: Totem and Taboo, Moses and Monotheism and other works* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 43-224.
28. This campaign had already a contested place in the history of modernist debates about the ideology of the aesthetic. In the epilogue of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935), Walter Benjamin countered Marinetti’s ecstatic celebration of the aesthetics of the recent Ethiopian war with a call for a communist politicization of art. See Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 235.
29. Mailer misattributes this to Benito Mussolini’s son-in-law Galeazzo Ciano. The

quote actually comes from Vittorio Mussolini, who wrote that “one group of horsemen gave me the impression of a budding rose unfolding as the bomb fell in their midst and blew them up”. See Laura Fermi, *Mussolini* (Chicago and London: Phoenix Books, 1961), 325.

30. *The Presidential Papers*, 149-150.

31. “Norman Mailer - Oh My America (Part 1 Farewell To The Fifties)”.

32. Poirier 115.

33. *Why Are We At War?*, 8.

34. “When I consider the nearly three thousand people who died in the Twin Towers disaster, it’s not the ones who were good fathers and good mothers and good daughters, good brothers and good husbands or sons, that I mourn most. It’s the ones that came from families that were less happy [...] it’s into the less successful families that terrorism bites most deeply. Because there is that terrible woe that one can’t speak to the dead parent or the dead son or daughter or dead mate; one can’t set things right anymore. One was planning to, one was hoping to, and now it’s lost forever. That makes it profoundly obsessive”. Quote from *Why Are We At War?*, 21. This is a fairly clear expression of the distinction between the classic Freudian mournful and melancholic responses to trauma. The horror of 9/11 provoked tensions about the ownership of grief. Essentially private grief is often over-ridden by the necessity for appropriate public forms of mourning (which are as essential as they are frequently ideological in content). The *New York Times*’ “Portraits of Grief”, for example, played an important role in focusing public mourning of the disaster, but was later accused of homogenising the victims and their stories. There was little talk of “less successful families”. See Jeffrey Rosen, “The Naked Crowd”, *Spiked Online*, 19 Jul 2004. Web. 3 Aug 2004.

35. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London; New York: Verso, 2004), xiii. In the aftermath of the attacks, Left intellectuals were widely denounced for, at best, subordinating the human costs of the tragedy to their own critiques (of capitalism, of American foreign policy, and so on), and at worst endorsing Jihadism. Furthermore, intellectuals who pointed to an aesthetic dimension to the atrocity (e.g. the descriptions of the falling towers as artwork by Damien Hirst, Karlheinz Stockhausen, and Elizabeth Wurtzel) were also vilified. Mailer’s own views were thoroughly caught up in this wave of anti-intellectualism. The *New Republic* devoted an entire special edition of their post-9/11 “Idiocy Watch” column to misrepresenting Mailer’s views as a just this kind of political and aesthetic triumphalism. “Idiocy Watch: Special Norman Mailer Edition”, *New Republic* 20 November 2001.

36. “Norman Mailer and Marshall McLuhan Debating 1968”.

37. Fetterley 162-164.

38. *The Presidential Papers*, 306.

39. David Cronenberg said of Warhol on the fifth anniversary of 9/11 that “The images of people jumping out of the buildings - he had already done paintings like that.

It was a bizarre prophecy.” Matthew Hays, interview with David Cronenberg, “He created his own universe and became its star”, *The Guardian* 11 September 2006. Web. 4 November 2014.

40. Confrontation has sometimes been regarded as a way of dealing with shock in modernism. Walter Benjamin, in “On Some Motifs of Baudelaire”, understood the pose of combat in these terms: “Baudelaire has portrayed this condition in a harsh image. He speaks of a duel in which the artist, just before being beaten, screams in fright. This duel is the creative process itself. Thus Baudelaire placed the shock experience at the very centre of his artistic work [...] Baudelaire made it his business to parry the shocks, no matter where they might come from, with his spiritual and physical self. This shock defence is depicted graphically in an attitude of combat” (*Illuminations*, 159-160). The attitude of combat is characteristic of Mailer’s work, particularly in the motif of the locked stare. But it is interesting to see this partly as a defense formation. See chapter 6.

41. *Cannibals and Christians*, 309.

42. *Cannibals and Christians*, 308.

43. The discussion of “hospital modern” comes from a documentary from the early seventies for Swedish television. “Norman Mailer’s USA”, *YouTube* 30 September 2012. Web. 5 November 2014.

44. Bryan S. Turner, “Recent Developments in the Theory of the Body”, *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*, eds. Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth, Bryan S. Turner (London: Sage Publications, 1991), 5.

45. *The Return of the Real*, 144, 157-159. and *Formless: A User’s Guide* (New York; Cambridge, Mass.: Zone Books, 1997). Bataille was also an influence on Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytically tinged concept of abjection, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

46. George Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, 13. Citations are hereafter bracketed in the text.

47. *The Naked and the Dead*, 128.

48. See William Phillips’s remarks in Manso, *Mailer: His Life and Times*, 183.

49. According to his biographer J Michael Lennon, a Harvard contemporary of Mailer’s recalled that in a seminar Mailer “argued for the importance of writers describing every bodily function, including bowel movements. Weiss said he had no problems with such descriptions, but it was wrong to call them literature. Mailer responded by reading from the ‘Calypso’ chapter of *Ulysses*”. *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*, 29.

50. *Visions of Excess*, 55.

51. Krauss. *Art Since 1900*, 247.

52. See Krauss’s essay “The Destiny of the Informe” in *Formless: A User’s Guide*, 235-252.

53. *Cannibals and Christians*, 67.
54. *The Return of the Real*, 144.
55. There is some uncertainty about the source of this aphorism. Mailer regularly attributed it to St Odo of Cluny. In *Eroticism*, Bataille attributes it to St. Augustine. See *Eroticism* (London: Boyars, 2006), 57-58.



## Chapter 4. *An American Dream* and the politics of the expulsive self

### *Introduction*

*An American Dream* is a violent fantasy which presents a “mirror image”<sup>1</sup> to the trauma of the Kennedy assassination. It is also routinely read as one of its author’s most notorious self-advertisements. Stephen Rojack, the narrator-protagonist, is as vilified and critically divisive a “hero” as any in American fiction, in part because he has been so readily identified with his author. This is not to suggest that *An American Dream* is any kind of self-portrait. Rojack is clearly not identical with Mailer in any direct biographical sense. But the novel is in a meaningful sense an author-projection. The novel is a thematic companion piece to *Barbary Shore*, with its operative themes of trauma, mirroring, projection, identity, and the disjuncture between public and private selves. In *An American Dream*, however, the projections are kaleidoscopically multiplied and refractory, making the novel what Judith Fetterley calls an interpretative “game of hide and seek”.<sup>2</sup> The game of hunt-the-author was largely motivated by the suggestion that Mailer was capitalising on the public notoriety over the stabbing of his second wife, Adele Morales. For this and other reasons, *An American Dream* has been central to feminist discussions of Mailer’s sexual politics, which have tended to highlight symbolic connections between the text and this difficult episode. Rojack’s subjectivity is equally yoked to the historical and national text, however, through a consistent identification with Kennedy’s heroic persona. Mailer’s own public record of identification with the Kennedy mythos heightens the sense that Rojack is an author-proxy, albeit a highly fictionalised one. These complex layers of identification between author, his historiography, and his fictional creation have proved significantly tricky to unpack.

*An American Dream*’s self-advertisements/concealments are consistent with the novel’s wider postmodern texture. The crossover of fact and fiction is a hallmark of the new sensibility in the arts, as is the blending of modes and narrative genres that the novel performs to scandalous effect. *An American Dream* owes a particular aesthetic



debt to the avant-camp aesthetics of the sixties' "art of the absurd", which are a major theme of Mailer's critical writings at this period. A number of traditional critics baulked at what Leslie Fiedler more approvingly called *An American Dream's* "porno-aesthetics".<sup>3</sup> The novel's extraordinary images of sex and violence are layered with what was often taken to be an *outré* structure of metaphysical symbolism and imagery. The novel's appropriation and abuse of the conventions of popular detective fiction, its surrealist use of "Pop" materials, and its excess of manner further mark it as an example of camp.

Yet there are aspects of *An American Dream* that reflect Mailer's broad rejection of postmodern claims. While it shares camp's aestheticism, *An American Dream* fundamentally rejects emergent postmodern notions of black humour, irony, or "blank parody".<sup>4</sup> As we saw in the last chapter, Mailer had read Susan Sontag's "Notes On Camp", and his literary criticism of the period contributes to contemporary debates about the end of the American novel which were part of wider cultural arguments about camp forms. In an essay republished in *Cannibals and Christians*, Mailer outlined a genealogy of two warring impulses in the American novel: an "upstart" lower class fiction of social "strategy", versus an "aristocratic" upper class fiction of "tactics" or "manners". Contemporary trends in American fiction, which was split between documentary and an "aristocratic" style of absurdist mockery, were for Mailer indications that the "two impulses in American letters had failed".<sup>5</sup> This failure, Mailer felt, could be attributed partly to the displacement of literary narrative by an increasingly visualised mass culture. In these arguments, Mailer reveals himself as an *artistic* left-conservative as well as a political one. Mailer's main claim is essentially about the historical decline of the *social* forms of the American novel: "Camp is the art which evolved out of the bankruptcy of the novel of manners".<sup>6</sup> In its mocking war against formalisms, radical postmodern absurdity risked ceding itself to an essentially nihilistic abandonment of "moral seriousness".

*An American Dream* can be read in this light as an allegory of Mailer's embattled

relationship with the Great American Novel. Mailer had himself failed to produce any significant fiction since *The Deer Park*, and a serial novel under tight deadlines seemed to make both financial and aesthetic sense. But this element of personal necessity was married to a serious literary intention. In response to criticisms that *An American Dream* was a formally incoherent text, Mailer made the counter-intuitive claim that “I wanted to write a novel of action, of suspense, of character, of manners, against a violent background [...] *An American Dream* in a funny way becomes a novel of manners”.<sup>7</sup> Mailer is clearly describing *An American Dream* here in the terms of his wider engagement with death of the novel discourse. He is also attaching *An American Dream* to a particular historical branch of American fiction. The novel of manners is a fiction of social “tactics” that deals for Mailer in “the manners of the drawing room, the deaths and lifes of the drawing room, the cocktail party, the glorious tactics of the individual kill”.<sup>8</sup> Mailer’s concern is specifically with the aggressivity of “manners”, and by implication that of good social and artistic form in general.

Where does this violence in the novel come from? Mailer identifies this aggressivity with the “aristocratic” branch of the American novel, which he traces to Fitzgerald, Wharton, and, suggestively, Henry James. While he says tantalisingly little about James, he nevertheless gives him a central role in his genealogy. One way to look at this is to examine the historical situation of James’ late nineteenth century realism. At least three things are at play here. First is the historical economic importance of the Gilded Age. Christopher Lasch locates in the Gilded Age’s spirit of capitalist accumulation a masked self-interest in which friendliness and good manners “conceals but does not eradicate a murderous competition for goods and position”.<sup>9</sup> It is no coincidence that Richard Godden also sees the line James-Fitzgerald-Mailer as a key trajectory in the American “fiction of capital”.<sup>10</sup> Second, there is at least an analogy between Nietzsche’s recognition of a will to power inherent in laws and moral codes in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, and a similar aggression of “manners” in James’s fiction of the same period. In James the sheer accretion of social detail (of codes of conduct, rituals, etiquettes,

fashions, etc) speaks an idea of formalised violence, whose variety of social effects ultimately incorporate the tragic. Third, alongside this is an acknowledgement in American fiction of an anthropological dimension to manners, which is clearly at play in the line James-Wharton-Fitzgerald. If Mailer was not the first American novelist to suggest that polite society works on primitive, tribalistic principles, *An American Dream* applies to this idea a new standard of violence.

*An American Dream as a social fiction*

A relationship to social fiction is announced at the opening of *An American Dream*:

I met Jack Kennedy in November 1946. We were both war heroes, and both of us had been elected to Congress. We went out one night on a double date and it turned out to be a fair evening for me. I seduced a girl who would have been bored by a diamond as big as the Ritz.<sup>11</sup>

The genre conventions of the novel of manners are immediately established by an allusion to F. Scott Fitzgerald's fantasia *The Diamond as Big as the Ritz*. *An American Dream*, at least in its initial stages, is a savage fable of marriage and finance in New York high society in a similar vein to *The Beautiful and Damned* (1922) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925). The novel is in an obvious sense concerned with *the American Dream*, a myth embodied in Rojack, whose social and political ambitions lead to his marriage to Deborah, heiress to Barney Kelly's trucking fortune. *An American Dream* is the most potent example of Mailer's fascination with the rich, a class presented as aggressive, calculating, sulphurous, but also deeply seductive and charismatic. Mailer shares Fitzgerald's ethnographic sense that the rich are a race apart, "different from you and me"<sup>12</sup>, and this sensitivity to minute but socially telling distinctions of ethnicity and class (undoubtedly coloured in Mailer's case by his Jewishness) is fictionally reflected in Rojack's status obsessions. Despite his good marriage, Rojack (descended from "peddlers" of Irish and Jewish stock) is excluded from the ultimate inner sanctum<sup>13</sup> of power both by birth and

qualities.

Joan Didion's perceptive early review of the novel was one of the first to pick up on its kinship with Fitzgerald's fiction, and the terms of her reading remain instructive.

Didion writes that the novelists share:

a fascination with the heart of the structure, some deep feeling for the mysteries of power. For both Mailer and Fitzgerald, as for the tellers of fairy tales, there remains something sexual about money, some sense in which the princess and the gold are inextricably one.<sup>14</sup>

Didion's equation of the "princess" and the "gold" gets to the heart of the novel.

Deborah Kelly is not only a "portal" (1) to Rojack's ambition, but a familial access point to the deep structure of financial power. This notion of a "portal" (with all its connotations of sexual connection) attended by "ogres" (1) clearly points to the "fairy tale" dimension of the novel: here, different social and economic spheres are sensed as magical alternative realities. Rojack's subjectivity hinges precisely on this negotiation of the magical social world.

Rojack's narrative (its reliability should be approached with caution) is ethnographic in its perception of a formalised primitivism in high society. The Kellys' social tactics are tribal, and thoroughly rooted in the values of aggressive financial accumulation. Deborah is an "exceptional hunter" (35), a product of her European aristocratic stock, and these primitive qualities are reflected in her Manhattan apartment:

The apartment she had now was a small duplex suspended some hundred or more feet above the East River Drive, and every vertical surface within was covered with flock, which must have gone for twenty-five dollars a yard; a hot-house of flat velvet flowers, royal, sinister, cultivated in their twinings, breathed at once from all four walls. It had the specific density of a jungle conceived by Rousseau, and Deborah liked it best of all her purloined pads. (21)

The tableau here is primitive, gothic, its kitsch heightened to the point of the uncanny.

The nod to the hyper-exoticised impressionist painting of Henri Rousseau contributes to this primitivism. The flat kitsch artifice of the flock is uncontained by its surface space, which contributes to a feeling of deathly growth. These breathing “velvet flowers” are unmistakably an extension of Deborah’s threatening, castrating femininity. The horticultural imagery, however, hints also at Rojack’s ambivalence regarding social mobility and racial bloodlines. Deborah is “royal, sinister, cultivated”, an “issue” of aristocratic Mangaravidis and banking Caughlins (1), as Rojack is careful to note. Considering himself a “Raw Jock” (2), Rojack pursues the “cultivated”, a pursuit that returns him to his very anxiety about roots.

Rojack’s obsession with material and social origins is particularly bound up with the radical equivalence of money. In contrast with his daughter, “Kelly’s family was just Kelly; but he had made a million two hundred times” (1). There are strong suggestions of a Faustian source to this accumulation of wealth. Rojack is clearly seduced by the Devil as much as by his daughter (there is a persistent incestuous and homoerotic subtext at work here), and this is in some sense an attraction to the carnality of power. For Rojack there really is something “sexual about money”, something alluring and even olfactory. This reference to smell is not gratuitous. The text consistently links the olfactory with the financial:

It was not just her odor (that smell with the white gloves off) of the wild boar full of rot, that hot odor from a gallery of the zoo, no, there was something other, her perfume perhaps, a hint of sanctity, something as calculating and full of guile as high finance, that was it – she smelled like a bank. (34)

There is an echo here of Jay Gatsby’s observation that Daisy Buchanan’s voice is “full of money”.<sup>15</sup> There is a common sense here that the wealthy don’t so much possess money as they are sensually imbued with it. What is peculiar to Mailer is an aesthetic fascination with smell as the sense where money and origins mingle. Smell is the most primitive sense and the one most associated in Mailer with the “essence of things” or what he calls in *Why Are We In Vietnam?* the “stinking roots of things”.<sup>16</sup> To get to the

“roots of things” is for Mailer to have an essential nose for structure, to penetrate into that mysterious substratum of experience that lies below the world of visible signs, or “manners”. Beneath the layers of perfume and money, for instance, Rojack detects a scarcely concealed animal aggression.<sup>17</sup>

This is not, however, simply a matter of social ethnography. Rojack’s very subjective identity circulates around this disjunction between public manners and a violence beneath its surface. As a television personality and politician, Rojack is invested in various kinds of role-playing. He attributes the collapse of his political ambitions to the “distance between my public appearance” and a “secret frightened romance with the phases of the moon” (7). This fundamental dissociation at the heart of Rojack’s narration is linked to other interests the novel shows in themes of mastery and identity. One way of reading the novel has been to regard it as an outlandish act of storytelling motivated by its narrator’s drive to self-invention and self-mastery. As Nathan A. Scott has suggested, Rojack doesn’t simply narrate the tale, in an important sense he invents it through the “riot and fecundity of his imaginative powers”.<sup>18</sup> Rojack’s narrative self-fashioning consists partly of creating himself as a subject through language. This is consistent with Rojack’s efforts to create himself within the social sphere, to be self-made as well as self-making. Yet this is to overstate the extent to which Rojack is entirely master of his own plot. He is manifestly also, in Nigel Leigh’s terms, a “power subject”<sup>19</sup>, constituted through marriage by financial and political power. Further, Rojack is also consistently beset by the problem of self-management, of maintaining public appearance. These differing meanings of mastery are contained in a pun Rojack makes on the sense of the word “[G/g]overnment” (2). While its capitalised form signifies political authority, Rojack uses the uncapitalised form to refer to an ideal of self-government, and it is the gap between the two that the narrative is always seeking in some sense to resolve. Most pertinently, Rojack is preoccupied with forging a public self through the mastery of traumatic experience, of managing a subjectivity immersed in a “private kaleidoscope of death” (2).

*The traumatic subject and maternity*

Again, it is the experience of war that appears to be the root of a Mailer hero's problems with identity. Rojack traces his lack of "government" directly to the killing of four German soldiers on which his public heroism and career is founded:

I did not throw the grenades on that night on the hill under the moon, *it* threw them, and *it* did a near-perfect job. The grenades went off somewhere between five and ten yards over each machine gun, *blast, blast*, like a boxer's tattoo, one-two, and I was exploded in the butt from a piece of my own shrapnel, whacked with a delicious pain clean as a mistress' sharp teeth going 'Yummy' in your rump, and then the barrel of my carbine swung around like a long fine antenna and pointed itself at the machine-gun hole on my right where a great bloody sweet German face, a healthy spoiled young beauty of a face, mother-love all over its making, possessor of that overcurved mouth which only great fat sweet young faggots can have when their rectum is tuned and entertained from adolescence on, came crying, sliding, smiling up over the edge of the hole, 'Hello death!' blood and mud like the herald of sodomy upon his chest, and I pulled the trigger as if I were squeezing the softest breast of the softest pigeon which ever flew, still a woman's breast takes me now and then to the pigeon on that trigger, and the shot cracked like a birth twig across my palm, *whop!* and the round went in at the base of his nose and spread and I saw his face sucked in backward upon the gouge of the bullet, he looked suddenly like an old man, toothless, sly, reminiscent of lechery. Then he whimpered '*Mutter,*' one yelp from the first memory of the womb (3-4)

While we are clearly in the domain of the war novel here, the powerful contortions of the long sentence extends beyond realism in its careful gradation of inner experience. There is an explosion of language and imagery here that puts on display the expulsive "minority" aspects of the American hero's subjectivity. The passage renders bare the mechanism of "facing", by showing how Rojack externalises his inner associative processes through violence. Rojack disavows any strict agency here. This belies, however, the marked aggressivity of the death-drive, attributed first to the agency of the moon (the repetition of "*it*" /id), and then violently projected onto the "bloody great

sweet German face”, which undergoes a series of metamorphoses and deformations. This is less a facing of the Nazi other (note the odd pathos in “*Mutter*”) than an encounter with the expulsions of the traumatic-fascist self.

“*Mutter*” is a clue to what is going on in this passage. It is particularly noteworthy, given the novel’s critical history, that this drama of expulsion is enacted in the imagery through a revolt against the feminine. Feminist criticism long ago identified fear of the feminine as a defining theme of *An American Dream*, a novel Judith Fetterley describes as “the repository of all the hates and fears, the lies and disguises, the violence and cruelty, the guilt and dread that are at the heart of sexist society”<sup>20</sup>, a reading that in effect turns Mailer’s metaphysics of the belly politically on itself. The imagery of this passage is remarkable in the extent of its traumatic relationship to the feminine. This imagery (castrating vagina dentata, the male carbine-phallus, war wounds as sexual organs) is further sustained by a current of homosexual panic, which deepens and complicates the entangled equation, ever-present in Mailer, of eroticism and violence. One consistent feature of this passage has, however, not been fully engaged by critics: Rojack’s experience of the dispersal and formlessness of his body and self in relation to the *maternal* body and its surrogates. The language of the passage is consistently that of birthing trauma, as if Rojack were emerging new-born from the foxhole-womb.

In a Jungian reading of the novel, Robert J. Begiebing identified allegorical patterns of death and rebirth in *An American Dream*.<sup>21</sup> My reading of this pattern of maternal imagery is informed by a different set of sources, notably Julia Kristeva’s theory of *abjection*. Kristeva’s theory of the abject is directly influenced by Bataille’s *informe*, and while Rosalind Krauss argues for a theoretical and practical distinction of the two terms, their connection is relevant here.<sup>22</sup> For Kristeva, the abject is that which “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite”<sup>23</sup>; it is thus a state between subject and object, inside and outside. For Kristeva, the abject thus has a deconstructive function, but she roots this idea firmly within a psychoanalytical account of the body. Kristeva draws on Melanie



Klein's work on infantile development to trace the state of abjection to the pre-Oedipal period where the child's identity is not yet clearly distinguished from the body of the mother. For Kristeva, the abject is that which has to be expelled in order for the subject to secure his or her sense of identity. Yet the abject continues to exert an uncanny, threatening "power of horror" over the subject. Because of its links with the maternal body, the abject in the symbolic or social order is particularly associated with the feminine.

What implications are there here for our reading of the passage? Mailer here follows a commonplace of war literature: the feminisation of the wounded male body. In Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Jake Barnes' war injuries are closely linked with feelings of passivity and impotence that are involved in his sense of sexual identity. Similarly, for Rojack in *An American Dream*, the abjection of the war-wounded body is clearly associated with its feminisation. The shrapnel is clearly personified as what Klein calls the phallic "bad mother"<sup>24</sup>, who represents the projection of the infant's aggressive death instincts. This personification first appears in the imagery of anal penetration, which in Mailer always suggests a loss of power, but here is reported as a masochistic "delicious pain". The imagery then shifts to an essentially cannibalistic fantasy of being swallowed, of the self's ingestion by the mistress' "sharp teeth". The particular fantasy of cannibalisation by the bad mother in Klein is associated with the threat of a loss of autonomy and borders which Kristeva calls abjection. At the very point of this threatened loss of self, however, Rojack's subjectivity "flips" from passive to active; from feminine to masculine; from masochistic pleasure-pain to sadistic aggression.<sup>25</sup>

I have given this passage such detailed explication since, in a number of critical ways, it is key to the allegorical action of the novel as a whole. The terms of the interiority of Rojack's violence are clearly set out here. But strange as it might seem, the scene of abjection is also a storehouse for the imaginative materials that mark the novel out as a "fairy tale". Klein's work on infantile development is often applied to the study of fairy tales. In fairy tales, the emotional ambivalence of the threatened

infantile ego is resolved by splitting. Tracy Willard writes that “As children have difficulty comprehending a single person with conflicting qualities, the infant splits the figure into two: one gratifying good mother, one frustrating bad mother. The child then must deal with the aggressive bad mother, who is almost always defeated in the fairy tales”.<sup>26</sup> *An American Dream* closely follows this fairy tale structure, particularly in Rojack’s deep ambivalence about women and mothers. Rojack’s psychological “birthing” (his past is referenced only with the nods to Irish-Jewish roots and an ancestry of “peddlers”) recreates the central American myth of Adamic self-creation as a fantasy of parthenogenesis, in which the female is excluded. This fantasy is nevertheless spectrally haunted by the scene of maternal abjection (attachment to roots, death, the body of the mother, formlessness).<sup>27</sup> Rojack’s path to resolving this ambivalent relationship to the scene of abjection is played out in the classic form of a fairy tale: the defeat of the phallic bad mother (Deborah), leads to the discovery of love and partial redemption from the “gratifying good mother” (Cherry).

*An American Dream* is, by the standards of the fairy tale, hardly “innocent”. The dramatic centre of the novel is a notorious act of violence. At the climax of a drunken evening of verbal aggression, Rojack strangles his estranged wife in her New York apartment. After sodomising the German maid, Rojack goes on the run from the police before hooking up with Cherry, a blonde nightclub singer and gangster’s moll. Read as an adult “fairy tale”, the hero does indeed defeat the “bad mother” (Deborah is the archetypal castrating “Great Bitch”<sup>28</sup>) on his route to a sort of redemption. The key question is: how is the reader to interpret this narrative? As a morality tale? Or as a misogynistic fantasy of murder and domination, where Mailer’s obsessions show their true face? A significant number of critics follow the latter reading. Aside from the too-close-for-comfort analogies with Mailer’s real-life assault on his wife Adele (a subject to which we shall return), there is also the suspicion that the novel seems to endorse murder as a relieving cure for a cancerous male selfhood. In a subjective sense, Rojack does experience violence as liberation. A close reading of the first two chapters,

however, reveals that the “defeat” of the bad mother is neither a successful act of mastery, nor unambiguously curative. It is rather better understood as a traumatic *repetition* of Rojack’s war experiences. What Mailer gives us in these passages, in fact, is an extended portrait of the *cannibal* self. The question to ask here is a straightforward one: what triggers Rojack’s violence?

The most obvious answer is marital failure, and with it the closing of the “portal” to social and political success. Deborah’s infidelities with high-status men (perhaps even President Kennedy himself) arouse in Rojack a status anxiety that is also bound up with his masculine identity. The direct trigger for violence, however, is oddly both more metaphysical and more obscene. Rojack specifically revolts at an allusion that Deborah makes to analingus. This is not as gratuitous as it might seem. Mailer tends to select his metaphors with some care, and here the offensive imagery is precisely chosen. In *Prisoner of Sex*, Mailer insisted that Millett had misread this as an allusion to sodomy.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps only Mailer would hang so much meaning on the distinction. But it still needs to be asked: why specifically is this so offensive for Rojack? A textually pertinent reason is that it mirrors the “delicious pain” of the shrapnel which enters Rojack’s body “as clean as a mistress’ sharp teeth going ‘Yummy’ in your rump”. Deborah’s goading invokes the masochistic fragmentation of Rojack’s war-torn body, his fear of feminine passivity, and the spectre of the cannibalistic mother. And it is at this precise point that Rojack again flips towards active aggression and domination. This is an act of masculine revolt, but crucially it is an act that locks Rojack deeper into the power-logic of mastery itself.

There is a little more going on here than repetition-compulsion, however, since this act of violence is both an acting out *and* an act of unlocking. Rojack’s physical domination of Deborah is accompanied by the imagery of the “portal”: “I had had a view of what was on the other side of the door, and heaven was there, some quiver of jeweled cities shining in the glow of a tropical dusk” (31). There is a suggestion of a tear in the real here that might indicate Rojack’s entrance into sheer psychosis.

However, textually this is a premonitory flash of the “jewelled city” in the desert outside Las Vegas that Rojack hallucinates in the novel’s dystopian epilogue (a spectacle of lights that anticipates the more collective dream-logic of the psychic nation).

What Rojack experiences through the first flash of this vision, however, is a fantasy of renewal: “my flesh seemed new. I had not felt so nice since I was twelve” (32).

The defeat of the imaginary relationship with the bad mother (an implied return to adolescent autonomy) does liberate Rojack into a renewed sense of subjective identity.

This transformation, however, has the characteristics of traumatic shock:

I looked into the mirror searching once again into the riddle of my face; I had never seen a face more handsome. It was the truth. It was exactly the sort of truth one discovers by turning a corner and colliding with a stranger (38).

Like Mickey Lovett’s glance into the mirror in *Barbary Shore*, which this so resembles, Rojack at the very moment of apparent subjective autonomy is caught in the scene of imaginary misrecognition.

At this point, Rojack makes a shocked identification with the German soldier:

My hair was alive and my eyes had the blue of a mirror held between the ocean and the sky – they were eyes to equal at last the eyes of the German who stood before me with a bayonet – one moment of fright flew like a comet across the harbor of my calm, and I looked deeper into the eyes in the mirror as if they were keyholes to a gate which gave on a palace, and asked myself, ‘Am I now good? Am I evil forever?’ (38)

The first thing to note here is that this has all the features of a *Nazi* identification. For Kate Millett, Rojack is an archetypal example of Mailer’s fascination as a Jewish writer with the “blond beast”, his “romance with Aryan manliness”.<sup>30</sup> The markers here of racial fascination are Rojack’s blue eyes and reflected handsome features. Rojack scans the mirror for signs of an ethical selfhood, but what he misrecognises above all is his own monstrousness, which he finds projected instead in Deborah’s haunting stare:

She was bad in death. A beast stared back at me. Her teeth showed, the point of light in her eye was violent, and her mouth was open. It looked like a cave. I could hear some wind which reached down to the cellars of a sunless earth. A little line of spit came from the corner of her mouth, and at an angle from her nose one green seed had floated its small distance on the abortive rill of blood. I did not feel a thing (40)

At this juncture, there is a marked contrast with the “facing” of the German soldier.

The earlier episode is characterised by a full-ish repertoire of psychoanalytic tropes and identifications, a dialectical shifting between subject and object, inside and outside. In this passage, however, there is a voiding of subjectivity, an absolute negation of self.

The “power of horror” here derives not from mother’s body or scatological panic, but from the voiding gesture of *informe* (this is not so much a “face” as a collection of desubjectified partial objects). *Informe* for Bataille is “the same as saying that the universe is like a spider or a blob of spit”<sup>31</sup>, which here resembles what Lacan calls the gaze, the abyssal point of subjectivity. This is the negation of Rojack’s “handsome” mirror-image. There are echoes here of the gothic registers of Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, as if this face were the deformed attic portrait of Rojack’s criminality and moral corruption.

Mailer at this very point delivers one last *coup de théâtre*. Rojack completes the symbolic act of mastery in his seduction of Deborah’s German maid, Ruta. Here, the encounter with the *German* soldier is repeated and reworked in a sadistic seduction/rape of the *Nazi* Ruta, who Rojack finds a “high private pleasure in plugging” (45). In an infamous scene, Rojack violates Ruta alternately by vagina and anus. This act of sexual mastery thus invokes Rojack’s traumatic relationship to origins and to the body, but more importantly sets about resolving the deadlock of “good” and “evil” that confronts his mirror-self. The imagery and language explicitly calls upon Mailer’s private dualistic theology. Thus, the dialectic of vagina-anus is transposed in these scenes into a baroque metaphysics, an existential struggle between creation and destruction, form and formlessness, God and the Devil, with Rojack finally locking himself into the classic Mailerian semiotic chain of anus-excrement-devil. Much has been made of Mailer’s

fascination with anality, a subject we shall return to in chapter 6. What is crucial to note about Rojack's buggery of Ruta, however, is that it in effect enacts a Faustian compact with "der Teufel", which in turn conjures a cannibalistic fantasy where Rojack and Ruta feast on Deborah's corpse. This oral-anal sadism provides the ecstatic climax to Rojack's murderous rage.

*From the novel of manners to supernaturalism*

The metaphysics of God and the Devil outlined in these pages, however, reflects the novel's broader texture of supernaturalism. Rojack's private visions can be read as straightforward evidence of psychosis, an interpretative possibility the novel never entirely dismisses. The story he tells the sceptical, empirical Detective Roberts at the police station is an obvious fabrication, an elaborate screen-alibi composed from the stuff of his own schizoid preoccupations. Yet when Roberts states "I don't know how to put demons on a police report" (65), he is expressing the novel's wider epistemological concern with naturalist and supernaturalist questions, what Tony Tanner calls the novel's balancing of the "documentary" and the "demonic".<sup>32</sup> Rojack's paranoiac themes of cancer, guilt and demons are meant to be taken in literal terms as direct emanations of the crazy reality of sixties America. What Mailer offers is a *literally* psychic vision of the nation. Nigel Leigh notes that in this novel Mailer

takes completely seriously a whole range of occult phenomena associated with primitive religious experience: telepathy, demons, charms, communication with the dead, voices in the mind, psychic arrows, evil spirits, voodoo, vampires, and psychic emanations from people and things.<sup>33</sup>

These phenomena represent what Leigh calls the "prerational forces" that guide and persecute Rojack through his picaresque tour of New York streets. *An American Dream's* crime-and-no-punishment plot quickly gives way to that larger "plot" that Rojack's act of violence inadvertently uncovers, and to which he becomes subject. This "master"

plot involves shadowy connections in the worlds of institutional power (the police, Mafia, CIA, politics, and big business), connections which ultimately lead through Deborah to her father Barney Kelly.

*An American Dream* shares a belief common to much postmodern fiction that “everything is connected”.<sup>34</sup> Ideas of connection, of unlikely chains of cause and effect, of radical coincidence, of an over-arching “field of collision” (272), proliferate throughout the narrative. Every step Rojack takes in the aftermath of the murder reveals the extent of his entanglement in a larger plot. This pattern of absurd interconnection is at its most compressed in chapter 5, “A Catenary of Manners”, where a series of phone calls reveals increasingly unlikely strands of the master plot (Deborah’s Cassandra-like friend Bettina implicates Rojack’s wife in CIA activity, for example). Telephones often have a spooky or psychic quality in Mailer, which coincides here with the theme of eery connectivity.<sup>35</sup> The chapter-title is significant here. A “catenary” is the curve made by a rope or wire suspended between two poles (as in telephone or electricity lines); it can also describe a system of overhead wires in transport systems. Its root is from the Latin *catena* (chain), and it is also cognate with *concatenation*. The catenary here is a clear figure for the unassimilable tangle of networks and connections that constitutes the experience of the postmodern sublime. In *An American Dream*, the point of connection is generally a locus of traumatic shock (the deformation of body and car; uncanny communications from the living and dead; premonitions and psychic coincidences). And this is where paranoia comes in to play. Slavoj Žižek suggests that paranoia, as theorised by Freud in the Schreber case, should be understood as a *defence* formation against traumatic disorientation. It is an attempt by the subject to reconstruct a shattered symbolic universe. And for Žižek this attempt at reconstruction is akin to “cognitive mapping”.<sup>36</sup>

The double problem for Rojack is how to resolve his own traumatic guilt, while simultaneously trying to navigate through the larger “plot”. *An American Dream*’s absurd coincidences and connections suggest both a politico-economic mapping and a paranoid breakdown in language. Here we should consider a major feature of the novel

frequently observed by critics, Rojack's heightened use of metaphor.<sup>37</sup> *An American Dream* reproduces at the level of language the heightened sense of everyday "objects" and "relations" that we discussed in chapter 2. Rojack's subjectivity is driven by a paranoiac lack in signification which is filled in with what Jameson calls "schizophrenic signifiers". Rojack puts his predicament as follows: "I had a quick grasp of the secret to sanity – it had become the ability to hold the maximum of impossible combinations in one's mind" (159). The problem of taking the measure of the play of "impossible" forces and connections, which in a social sense also involves negotiating between the rich-owned New York skyline and Harlem underworlds, is exactly the problem of cognitive mapping. Rojack experiences this disorientation as literally vertiginous when he walks the parapet at Kelly's top-floor apartment at the Waldorf-Astoria. This is not only a test of courage, it also literalises Rojack's narrative predicament as a balancing act: his desire to sustain an integral subjectivity while mediating the daemonic circuits of global power, for which Kelly acts as a master signifier.

Kelly's conspiratorial evil is closely identified with Kennedy era national paranoia. Shadowing the text, of course, is the "psychic coincidence" that links Kelly to Lee Harvey Oswald. But the later, post-assassination chapters intersperse in the fictional plot allusions to national mourning:

'I never thought I'd have to explain to you,' said Kelly, 'that it doesn't matter what is done in private. What is important is the public show – it must be flawless. Because public show is the language we use to tell our friends and enemies that we still have order enough to make a good display. That's not so easy if you consider the general insanity of everything. You see, it doesn't matter whether people think you killed Deborah, it matters only whether people are given the opportunity to recognize it's been swept under the carpet, and you and I together are in control of the situation.' (235)

Kelly's tactics of cynical media manipulation echo Mailer's scepticism about media "ordure" in the wake of the Kennedy assassination. Public mourning is presented here not as healing, but as ritual display. In Kelly's terms, "public show" is a "language" in the



sense that it employs codes of behaviour and appearance that govern the perception of power. For Kelly, the purpose of these codes is primarily about the demonstration of the ability to manage public and private selves: it is at root a question of G/government. Mailer here hints at a powerful connection between the maintenance of good order (an “anal” capacity for self-discipline) and the accumulation of financial and political power. The implied source of Kelly’s public relations skills (which seem to have replaced the old social “tactics”) is the active historical agency of the Devil himself.

Kelly represents a significant change in the Mailer villain since General Cummings of *The Naked and the Dead*. The transition from Cummings to Kelly can be thought of as a shift from *strategy* to *tactics*. The failure of General Cummings on Anopopei is essentially a strategic one – a failure to master a “casual net of factors too large, too vague, for him to comprehend”. What one critic calls “the limitless reach of Kelly’s power”<sup>38</sup>, by contrast, is paradoxically not one of strategic authority, but of tactical and local flexibility, a satanic structural mastery of the forces and connection points of capital.<sup>39</sup> Kelly’s charismatic energy is, as Didion writes, close to the “heart of the structure”. But is his power as limitless as it seems? The idea of Kelly as a master agent is at times epistemologically questioned in the novel. As Žižek argues, the real secret of postmodern capital is that there is no Big Other, no totalitarian agent pulling all the strings. What is important therefore is the *belief* in the Big Other (structure here supersedes the charisma of the chief). *An American Dream* also questions the existence of the “Big Guy”: “You could have two big-time hoods discussing this [...] one would say, ‘The Big Guy don’t exist, forget it,’ while the other would just about cross himself” (172). The joke here, in Žižekian terms, is that these positions are effectively the same: belief or unbelief in the existence of the “Big Guy” (the Lacanian “Big Other”) does not alter one’s position in relation to the overall symbolic order.<sup>40</sup>

Kelly nevertheless remains in plot terms the incarnation of the tribal chief, represented in his totemic emblems, the lion and the serpent. Kelly’s power is that of the primal father whose patriarchal authority is based on a mastery of a) real and

symbolic kinship bonds and b) a network of financial and institutional connections. The “fairy tale” equation of the “princess” and the “gold” is of course at play here, but what is interesting to note is how this revolves around the particular motif of incest. Incest trauma recurs throughout the novel, most notably through Kelly’s literal incest with Deborah, which not only binds the “Devil” and his “daughter” into a literalised family romance, but also extends to a quasi-incestuous power of possession over Rojack himself. The presence of the incest taboo partly reflects Rojack’s fascination with bloodlines and carnal origins, which are also bound up with his traumatic identification with the maternal body. But incest in *An American Dream* is also a structural figure for the novel’s broader pattern of coincidence and connection. Richard Godden observes a similar deployment of the incest theme in Fitzgerald’s *Tender is the Night*, which he relates to the novel’s *economic* traumas.<sup>41</sup> The catenary is not only an economic motif but also a figure for a complex web of sexual interconnections which are central to the “fairy tale” structure of *An American Dream*. Rojack seeks to resolve the plot through the maternal chain Deborah-Ruta-Cherry, but the impasse to such a resolution is the chain of sexual connection that links all three women to “Daddy Warbucks”. At this point, we shall consider the final element in this chain: the “gratifying good mother”, Cherry.

#### *Woman and the psychic nation*

Rojack and Cherry’s lovemaking scene is a key episode in the canon of Mailer sexual politics, one that he attributed particular importance to in *Prisoner of Sex*.<sup>42</sup> The poetics of love in this passage resembles what the Hegelian scholar John O’Neill calls the “romance of recognition and reconciliation”, a romance that has politically utopian undertones but whose prime metaphor is the Garden of Eden. For O’Neill, in Eden “What the couple has to learn [...] is to desire each in the other, to overcome narcissistic self-projection and the vicissitudes of sadomasochism in the labor and sacrifice of love”.<sup>43</sup> This overcoming of narcissistic identification is a key theme not only in *An American Dream*, but in Mailer’s work more generally. Joseph Tabbi notes

the crucial importance of the removal of Cherry's diaphragm in this rendering of the Edenic scene, an act that revolves around Mailerian ideas about sex and technology.<sup>44</sup> Technology is narcissistic for Mailer because it removes us from direct and unmediated experience of self and others. Rojack's removal of the diaphragm locates this idea at the heart of sexual intimacy. Mailer's dialectics of facing is from this point of view compatible with O'Neill's Hegelian dialectic of desire and recognition. The first dialectical stage here is the idea of love as combat: "our wills now met, locked in a contest like an exchange of stares" (127). This gives way to a counter-movement of mutual reciprocity, where the lovers' wills "begin at last in the force of equality to water and loose tears". The movements of the language in this scene mimic the dissolving and unlocking of Rojack's traumatic fixations on Deborah and the German soldier: "Son of a bitch", I said, "so that's what its all about". And my mouth like a worn-out soldier fell on the heart of her breast' (128). Finally able to face his identity as a "murderer" (129), Rojack also returns here to the nurturing and oceanic comfort of the maternal body (although there is remnant here of his previous oral cannibalism).

This scene of mutual reciprocity is the "christian" antidote to the narcissistic self and its fascist dreams of mastery. However, this scene has been much criticised for its sexual politics, and in my view Tabbi's careful reassessment of its techno-politics doesn't quite do enough to dismiss the feminist critique.<sup>45</sup> Cherry exists here largely as a foil or a cipher, and the recognition here is almost entirely from the male point of view. This scene, whatever the beauty of its poetics, does not balance this with anything like a convincing representation of female experience. Moreover, Rojack here displaces his previous traumatic obsessions into a preoccupation with Cherry's maternity. A lot narratively hinges on the child Cherry conceives with Rojack in this encounter. His failure of courage on the parapet bears a fatal psychic connection to Cherry and her unborn child. Female fertility is thus a major stake for this version of male subjectivity, as feminist critics have repeatedly pointed out. Judith Fetterley notes that

In reading *An American Dream*, one is confronted with a massive

assault on the womb. There is not one instance of successful fulfilment of female creativity. Instead, *An American Dream* is saturated with references to wombs gone sour and dead, to the womb as a 'heartland of revenge,' 'an empty castle,' 'a storehouse of disappointments,' 'a graveyard'.<sup>46</sup>

On the feminist reading, then, female sexuality is indeed subject to a "pattern of projection and scapegoating" in *An American Dream*.

Without rejecting the force of the feminist argument, however, it is possible to support an allegorical reading of *An American Dream's* obsession with diseased wombs, miscarriages, and abortions. A central and relatively overlooked motif in Mailer's work is his personification of the American nation as a woman. The metaphorical identity of the feminine with the *polis* recurs throughout his writings, but its clearest articulation is perhaps in this apocalyptic example from *Armies of the Night*:

Brood on that country who expresses our will. She is America, once a beauty of magnificence unparalleled, now a beauty with leprous skin. She is heavy with child – no one knows if legitimate – and languishes in a dungeon whose walls are never seen. Now the first contractions of her fearsome labor begin – it will go on: no doctor exists to tell the hour. It is only known that false labor is not likely on her now, no, she will probably give birth, and to what? – the most fearsome totalitarianism the world has ever known? or can she, poor giant, tormented lovely girl, deliver a babe of a new world brave and tender, artful and wild?<sup>47</sup>

Mailer draws here on the prophetic registers of "The Second Coming" and its central image of a rough beast waiting to be born. The political upheavals of sixties' America are delivered here in a metaphor of apocalyptic and traumatic birth. And this is also the key to *An American Dream's* images of birthing trauma. Cherry is consistently identified in the text in national terms. She is a "national creation" (130), a gathering together of Florida, Georgia and California styles, or a series of movie-star blondes:

There was a champagne light which made her look like Grace Kelly, and a pale green which gave her a little of Monroe. She looked at different instants like a dozen lovely blondes, and

now and again a little like the little boy next door. A clean tough decent little American boy in her look: that gave charm to the base of her upturned nose tip-tilted (I was reminded again) at the angle of a speedboat skipping a wave, yes that nose gave character to the little muscle in her jaw and the touch of stubbornness of her mouth. She was attractive, yes. She had studied blondes, this Cherry, she was all of them, some blonde devil had escorted her through the styles. It was a marvel – sipping my bourbon – to watch such mercury at work. She could have been a nest of separate personalities if it had not been for the character of her bottom, that fine Southern piece. (97)

The fantasy life of the nation is mapped out allegorically here onto the female body. Here there is a connection with the Betty Grable map of *The Naked and the Dead*. Cherry is a protean (and postmodern) blend of the styles of blonde American womanhood.<sup>48</sup> Cherry effectively functions in the novel as a geographical screen on which Rojack can project his images of traumatic national destiny.

*An American Dream's* allegory of nation is vividly illustrated in its short dystopian epilogue. This surrealist coda condenses the images and themes of the main narrative into a nightmare vision of the near future, on a journey across “Super America” (269). On the outset of his journey, Rojack witnesses the autopsy of a cancerous body. This directly recalls his fixations with death and the haunting power of the body. But the “smell of death” that follows Rojack across the American West belongs here to a diseased body politic. The social topography of New York is replaced by an air-conditioned landscape of hotels and Las Vegas dice tables:

It was March, near the beginning of April. The heat wave held. I went into two atmospheres. Five times a day, or eight, or sixteen, there was a move from hotel to car, a trip through the furnace with the sun at one hundred and ten, a sprint along the Strip (billboards the size of a canyon) a fast sprint in the car, the best passenger car racing in America, driving not only your own piece of the mass production, but shifting lanes with the six or seven other cars in your field of collision. It was communal living at its best (272)

Nature plays little role in this vision of the American frontier as wasteland. This is a

vision of life lived in a “second atmosphere” (272) of atomised and insulated space. The fiction of J.G. Ballard is a useful contemporary reference point here, with its sense of a utopian and collective madness being liberated by mass technologies and built modernist environments: “the deserts of the West, the arid empty wild blind deserts, were producing again a new breed of man” (272). *An American Dream* is a fable about liberation in this specific dystopian sense: the insulated environments of hotels and automobiles produce a collective narcissistic aggression, the “communal living” of the superhighway. This vision thus allegorises the novel’s broader preoccupation with mastery and recognition.

Rojack’s visions find him on the edge of madness. Yet his hallucination in the Nevada desert is presented in imagery that the reader has encountered before:

The night before I left Las Vegas I walked out in the desert to look at the moon. There was a jewelled city on the horizon, spires rising in the night, but the jewels were diadems of electric and the spires were the neon of signs ten stories high. I was not good enough to climb up and pull them down (273).

The imagery of the “jewelled city” is predicted in Rojack’s murder of Deborah (31), and is later reimagined as a “heavenly city” during the romance and recognition scene with Cherry (128). I have already suggested that this imagery is bound up with the imagery of “portals”, of magical alternative social realities, of the locking and unlocking of the narcissistic self. In this final vision, this imagery is worked into a collective fantasy of alternative American futures. The early Puritan vision of America as a heavenly “City upon a Hill” is here reconfigured as a dystopian image of a neon-lit America, the America of mass spectacle. And it is at this point that Rojack has his final hallucinatory phone call with Cherry in the desert:

I wondered on, and found a booth by the side of the empty road, a telephone booth with a rusty dial. Went in and rang up and asked to speak to Cherry. And in the moonlight, a voice came back, a lovely voice, and said, ‘Why, hello, hon, I thought

you'd never call. It's kind of cool right now, and the girls are swell. Marilyn says to say hello. We get along, which is odd, you know, because girls don't swing. But toodle-oo, old baby-boy, and keep the dice for free, the moon is out and she's a mother to me.' (273)

A novel that begins with a heroic identification with Kennedy ends with a hallucinatory and elegiac invocation of Marilyn Monroe. But why does Mailer conclude on what Leo Bersani calls "the frivolous note of that charmingly nonsensical phone call to heaven"?<sup>49</sup> Partly, this surrealist phone call in the desert is a culmination of *An American Dream's* Pop modernism. But what makes this fairy tale of the dream-life of sixties' America so moving is precisely the element of traumatic loss. In his classic essay on "Mourning and Melancholia", Freud distinguished the successful work of mourning of the lost object from the unsuccessful and more ambivalent condition of melancholia.<sup>50</sup> With its imagery of the "baby boy" and moon as mother, this passage revisits the traumatic maternal scene. Rojack mourns the dream of love, but there also signs here of melancholic regression from the loved object: a narcissistic self-reproach at his failure to realise the dream of love through Cherry. Cherry-Marilyn is the feminine *imago* of the restorative mother whose fertility will restore the kingdom, in this case the utopian dreamspace of Kennedy's America. Rojack's failure to save Cherry thus intersects with his failure to capture an imaginative vision of America as a whole. What follows this reverie is Rojack's primitive flight to Guatemala and Yucatan, and this return to "nature" offers some prospect of sanity. The cost is a melancholic withdrawal from the "jewelled city" of modern America.

### *An American Dream and the "Trouble"*

At the start of this chapter, we noted that *An American Dream* is often read as a troubled negotiation of both the Kennedy assassination and a more personal trauma: Mailer's stabbing of his second wife Adele Morales. The "Trouble", as it came to be known, occurred in the early hours of the 19th November 1960, only weeks after

Kennedy's election and at a party announcing Mailer's candidacy for the mayoralty of New York. The event was not the success Mailer hoped it would be (a number of high profile invitees failed to turn up), and in a highly intoxicated and borderline psychotic state, Mailer stabbed his wife in the "upper abdomen and back"<sup>51</sup> with a penknife (he is reported to have said "I had to save you from cancer"<sup>52</sup>). He came close to killing her. The knife penetrated the coronary sac, and Adele was admitted to hospital with "internal hemorrhaging".<sup>53</sup> While Adele was recovering, Mailer was committed to Bellevue psychiatric hospital and diagnosed as "having an acute paranoid breakdown with delusional thinking"<sup>54</sup>, although at his own insistence he was discharged and declared sane after 17 days. The aftermath was hardly more edifying. Mailer's friends and the literary establishment "closed ranks"<sup>55</sup> round the house genius. Adele chose not to press charges, and Mailer ultimately received a suspended sentence for third-degree assault.

Some have detected a national significance as well as private failure in this episode. H.L. "Doc" Humes, the co-founder of *The Paris Review*, was present that evening, and later reflected:

I look upon the years of '59 to '62, with the Bay of Pigs, as some kind of watershed of evil. You can't underestimate this. Even the weather was weird – an Indian summer with clammy days. It was almost as if somebody had been out to totally overturn the applecart before Kennedy ever put foot in the White House, and here was one of America's finest writers literally cracking up in front of our eyes.<sup>56</sup>

There is something uncomfortably exculpatory in the idea presented here that Mailer's crack-up was a bellwether episode of the sixties decade of death and disaster, as if in committing this act of violence he were merely a transmitter for occult historical forces. Yet in its public meanings and its mythology this episode *was* as much about the sixties as *An American Dream*<sup>57</sup>. There are remarkable thematic parallels between the text of *An American Dream* and the events of the stabbing: cancer, gender, the Kennedys, psychosis, social anxiety culminating in a violent assault on a woman. Yet almost none of the actual



events of that evening appear directly in the novel (Deborah and Cherry are if anything fictional representations of Mailer's third and fourth wives, Lady Jeanne Campbell and Beverley Bentley). It is worth revisiting Foster's remarks on the subject of aesthetic compromise-formations:

It's not simply an either/or: either represent or disavow the trauma. There are aesthetic constructs that are almost compromise-formations – that acknowledge historical reality but in a bracketed, abstracted, or otherwise dehistoricized way. Again, the point is to describe these moves, to understand them, not to pathologize them.<sup>59</sup>

Like the Freudian dream-work, *An American Dream* puts its basic imaginative materials through a creative process of condensation, displacement, distortion, aesthetic intensification and traumatic repetition. Unlike the dream-work, there is also here the novelist's careful control and manipulation of form. It is as if the novel *formally* enacts the very struggle for mastery of trauma which is its subject. Could *An American Dream* then be a working through of incomplete, melancholic ambivalence, a text that is self-exculpatory as well as apologetic, concealing as much as revealing? Perhaps one way *An American Dream* does achieve this is by the very identification of woman and nation that we have seen is fundamental to its structure. In effect, Mailer works through the trauma by *politicising* it, by directly identifying the trauma with the dreamlife of the psychic *polis*.

This is where the feminist critique of *An American Dream* remains indispensable. The novel is not, I think, an endorsement of male violence and murder in quite the way that Kate Millett claimed when she argued, albeit polemically, that it was an “an exercise in how to kill your wife and be happy ever after”.<sup>59</sup> *An American Dream* is in many ways a psychological dissection of violent masculinity, if an ambivalent and entangled one (this it shares with its fictional descendant, Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*). Yet there is still something about the insistence and violence of the novel's traumatic relationship to the female body that feminism correctly captured and critiqued. Fetterley is right to see the novel as a parable of the sexual politics of the sixties. Fetterley links *An American Dream*

not only to the stabbing of Adele Mailer, but also to the shooting of Andy Warhol by Valerie Solanas, the writer of the S.C.U.M (Society for Cutting Up Men) manifesto. This feminist perspective on the politics of trauma may not be sufficient, but it is necessary.

A final point of connection between the *Trouble* and *An American Dream* is that they both can be read as a kind of Fitzgeraldian crack-up. This is not to say that too easy connections should be made between life and fiction. One reason to be cautious is that the stabbing was in an important sense a private tragedy (although also a criminal act) with lasting consequences for all involved, most notably Adele Morales but also the wider Mailer family. Life and fiction for the critic have to separate somewhere. But in Mailer's case there is evidence that he had been living his life as if it *were* a fiction, and the stabbing was in this sense a manifestation *in extremis* of a way of living that at least to a degree he had consciously cultivated. The usual critical move here is to suggest that Mailer was living out "The White Negro"'s injunction to "encourage the psychopath in oneself".<sup>60</sup> But another tendency has been less discussed: Mailer's interest in the social tactics of the cocktail party both in life and in American fiction, or in American social life as lived *as* a fiction.

In her memoir of the marriage, *The Last Party*, Adele Mailer describes her husband's obsession with parties. Mailer rarely refused invitations, and in a chilling forewarning of the stabbing, would cite a line from *The Great Gatsby* about "parties that changed peoples lives".<sup>61</sup> Mailer treated parties almost as performance spaces, and even as arenas of combat (one of the more pathetic details of the stabbing is that Mailer was wearing, like his fictional creation Sergius O' Shaughnessy in "The Time of Her Time", a bullfighter's shirt). The Fitzgeraldian romance of the party was linked for him with the "psychology of the orgy", which also came to be linked for him with the dawning of the sixties and the ascendancy of Kennedy. Read in this light, it is easy to see a connection between the fictional Fitzgeraldian crack-up of *An American Dream* and the great disaster of his life. This was a disaster that he would long regret, but would never directly address in his writing. In the end, this was a failure of facing, after all.<sup>62</sup>

1. Frank D. McConnell, quoted in Glenday 89.
2. Fetterley 155.
3. See Fiedler, "The New Mutants", *Partisan Review* 32.4 (1965): 513. During this period, Evelyn Waugh wrote in a letter that Mailer was a "pornographer" (Lennon 304). The early responses to *An American Dream* are a mini-episode of the sixties "culture wars". Traditional critics such as Philip Rahv, Elizabeth Hardwick and Conrad Knickenbocker broadly disapproved, while critics sympathetic to the new sensibility (Joan Didion, Leo Bersani and Fiedler) were more positive. Tom Wolfe combined a new sensibility position with a broad anti-modernism in his review. See Manso, *Mailer: His Life and Times*, 402-404.
4. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 17.
5. *Cannibals and Christians*, 128.
6. *Cannibals and Christians*, 127.
7. Quoted in Robert Merrill, *Norman Mailer Revisited* (New York: Twayne, 1992), 64. Merrill offers a suggestive discussion of *An American Dream's* ambiguous relationship to realism.
8. *Cannibals and Christians*, 124.
9. Lasch 64.
10. See *Fictions of Capital: The American Novel from James to Mailer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
11. *An American Dream* (London: Flamingo, 2001), 1. Citations hereafter referenced in the text in brackets.
12. From Fitzgerald's story "The Rich Boy" in *Flappers and Philosophers: The Collected Short Stories of F. Scott Fitzgerald* (London: Penguin, 2010), 289.
13. The contemporary American novelist Jennifer Egan calls this "the mirrored room". See *Look At Me* (New York: Anchor, 2002), 191.
14. Quoted in Manso, *Mailer: His Life and Times*, 403.
15. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (London: Penguin, 1990), 115.
16. *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (New York: Berkley, 1968), 35.
17. In the Foucauldian *History of Shit*, Dominique Laporte argues that the history of capitalism is the history of the deodorising and concealing properties of perfume. *History of Shit* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2000), 80-84.
18. Nathan A. Scott *Three American Moralists: Mailer, Bellon, Trilling* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), 65.

19. Leigh writes that “Rojack is poised between power-*over* and power-*to*, between being a ‘power subject’ and a power holder” (100).
20. Fetterley 155.
21. Begiebing is right to identify this maternal pattern in *An American Dream*, though his archetypal criticism perhaps seeks to defuse feminist concerns: “Once we see Deborah as a mythological figure in a visionary world, we will not be marooned on the literal issue of Mailer’s sexist portrayal of women as Kate Millett and Elizabeth Hardwick are”. *Acts of Regeneration: Allegory and Archetype in the Works of Norman Mailer* (Columbia; London: University of Missouri Press, 1980). This was written at a time when the analysis of mythic archetypes was a dominant strand in feminist literary criticism.
22. Krauss regards abjection as essentialising the category of Woman as “wound” (her artistic target here is Cindy Sherman), whereas *informe* structurally deconstructs such categories. See *Formless: A User’s Guide*, 244. Mailer’s “formless” is clearly categorical in the same sense in which Krauss reads *informe*. The treatment of gender in Mailer is infamous, but while he often relies on the classic oppositions of active/passive, subject/object, he does often subject them to dialectical scrutiny, and in this passage even troubles those very categories, while still relying on the abject scene of “woman as wound” that Krauss criticises. See also chapter 6 of this study.
23. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia UP, 1982), 4.
24. Melanie Klein, *The Psycho-analysis of Children* (London: Vintage, 1997), 179.
25. Klein, drawing on Karl Abraham, frequently associates cannibalistic fantasies with this relationship to the parents, and sometimes this fear of being eaten does convert into sadistic fantasies. See Klein 137, 151.
26. Tracy Willard, “Glossary of Theoretical Positions”, *Reconstruction* 2.2 (2002). Web. 29 June 2015.
27. The remarkable opening minutes of Paul Thomas Anderson’s *There Will Be Blood* (2007), where the monomaniacal oilman Daniel Playview (Daniel Day Lewis) is symbolically “birthed” in oil, is a vivid recent example of American parthenogenesis.
28. There is an allegorical link here to death of the novel discourse. In the essay “Some Children of the Goddess”, Mailer describes the novel as a form as “The Great Bitch in one’s life” (*Cannibals and Christians*, 131). Mailer’s argument in the essay is that the novel is a goddess-muse over which the male writer strives to exert authorial mastery. It is exactly this kind of mythologising that made Mailer such a visible target for feminism.
29. See *Prisoner of Sex* (New York: Primus, 1985), 94.
30. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago, 1977), 325. Millett associates this fascination with the “blond beast” with misogyny. As Ashton Howley remarks,

“Misogynist opinions and fascist sympathies are linked for Mailer’s detractors”. See “Mailer Again: Heterophobia in *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*”, *Journal of Modern Literature* 30.1 (2006): 31. This fascination is perhaps better understood, however, as a fascination with Nazi horror. In *Operation Shylock* (1993), a novel preoccupied particularly with themes of mirroring, doubling and facing in respect of Jewish identity, Philip Roth connects Rojack with the post-Holocaust image of the murderous gentile in Jewish fiction. *Operation Shylock* (London: Vintage, 2000), 213.

31. *Visions of Excess*, 31.

32. Tony Tanner, *City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1979), 364. Tanner’s chapter on Mailer, and his survey of this period of American fiction more widely, also focuses on the struggle between form and formlessness.

33. Leigh 107.

34. See Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity’s Rainbow* (1973; London: Vintage, 2000), 834 and Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (London: Picador, 1999), 826.

35. Mailer discusses his own psychic dislike of the phone in *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History* (New York: Signet, 1968), 14-15.

36. Slavoj Žižek, *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions in the (Mis)use of a notion* (London; New York: Verso, 2001), 120.

37. Fetterley, for example, notes the narrative’s “metaphoric frenzy” (155). Lennon writes that “The novel shows Mailer at the height of his metaphoric power” (341).

38. Glenday 98.

39. This kind of tactical mastery is close to what Foucault calls “micropower”. For Foucault, “the rationality of power is characterised by tactics that are often quite explicit at the restricted level where they are inscribed (the local cynicism of power)”. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998), 95. For Foucault, local power is inscribed at an “anchor point” (99), which is the same thing as the Lacanian *points de capiton* which structure the symbolic, which might also be thought of as mapping points.

40. For more on belief and the symbolic order, see Slavoj Žižek, “The Big Other Doesn’t Exist”, *Journal of European Psychoanalysis* Spring/Fall 1997. Web. 16 November 2014. Žižek often uses jokes to explore paradoxes of this kind.

41. *Fictions of Capital*, 111-116.

42. *Prisoner of Sex*, 225-226.

43. John O’Neill, ed., *Hegel’s Dialectic of Desire And Recognition: Texts and Commentary* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 19.

44. Tabbi 58.

45. And it is not only feminist critics who have criticised this scene. Martin Amis singled out this passage for its display of “false artistry”. His reading also highlights the imagery of feasting. Martin Amis, *The Moronic Inferno, and Other Visits to America* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), 63.
46. Fetterley 186.
47. *The Armies of the Night*, 320.
48. In this imaginative economy, the South seems to geographically ground these shifting versions of womanhood: it operates as a national-ideological “base”. There is also a connection to Bataille’s surrealism: Mailer counterpoints the parade of blondes with a description of the “too large” big toe. See Bataille’s “The Big Toe” in *Visions of Excess*, 20-23.
49. Leo Bersani, “The Interpretation of Dreams”. *Partisan Review* Fall (1965), 608.
50. Sigmund Freud, *On Metapsychology*, 245-268.
51. Hilary Mills, *Mailer: A Biography* (New York: Empire Books, 1982), 233.
52. Lennon 285.
53. Adele Mailer, *The Last Party*, 352.
54. Quoted in Mills 225.
55. See Mary V. Dearborn, *Mailer: A Biography* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 168.
56. Quoted in Manso, *Mailer: His Life and Times*, 318.
57. In a rare reference to the stabbing, Mailer wrote in *Of A Fire On The Moon*, that the “Trouble” was an opening event for a decade of “psychic disturbances”. *A Fire on the Moon* (London: Pan, 1970), 10, 20.
58. *Art Since 1900*, 322.
59. Millett 15.
60. Fetterley 159.
61. *The Last Party*, 189.
62. In a conversation shortly before the end of his life, Mailer admitted his difficulties in addressing the Trouble. The context was the release of Günter Grass’s memoir *Peeling the Onion* (2007), where the German novelist admitted that he had been involved with the Waffen SS during World War II. “The 20th Century on Trial: Günter Grass & Norman Mailer Interviewed By, and in Conversation With, Andrew O’Hagan”, *New York Public Library* 27 June 2007. Web. 29 June 2015.



## Chapter 5. The politics of performance: from Vietnam to the moon landings

*The Armies of the Night: politics as a happening*

Thirteen years after the Cold War symposium “Our Country and Our Culture”, the editors of *Partisan Review* published a joint statement on the Vietnam war that expressed reservations about America’s foreign policy, while calling for “an alternative policy” and “new thinking”<sup>1</sup> from the war’s critics. In the Fall 1965 issue, the journal published 14 dissenting anti-war responses to the original statement, all of which criticised the editors’ endorsement of the conflict. Mailer in his response felt the statement was written in “milk and milk of magnesia” for framing its pro-war and anti-communist stance in progressive language. In political terms, Mailer’s response repeated and refined the dissenting position of his contribution to “Our Country and Our Culture”. What was markedly different from Mailer’s 1952 statement, however, was the aesthetics of his political dissent. Mailer’s call for Joycean “silence, exile, and cunning” in “Our Country and Our Culture” was a statement of modernist refusal. In the 1965 dissenting statement, however, Mailer articulated a surrealist political aesthetic against the Vietnam war. Vietnam for Mailer was a war whose closest literary analogy was *Naked Lunch*: Vietnam would “up the ante and give us more Camp, more redneck, more violence in the streets, more teen-age junkies, more polite society gone ape, more of everything else Lyndon was trying to ship overseas”.<sup>2</sup>

Mailer concludes this counter-statement with a modest proposal. Instead of fighting a real war in Vietnam, the nation could acquire “two hundred million acres” of land in the Amazon for the simulation of televisual war games that would also be real theatrical “happenings”: “We’ll have war games with real bullets and real flame throwers, real hot-wire correspondents on the spot, TV with phone-in audience participation, amateur war movie film contests for the soldiers, discotheques, Playboy Clubs, pictures of the corpses for pay TV”.<sup>3</sup> This satirical picture of war as reality television leads



Mailer to a more radical proposal: that the Vietnam conflict was already a form of “happening”. The notion of Vietnam as the first postmodern, televisually “mediated” war is familiar from Hollywood films like *Apocalypse Now* (1979), and reportage such as Michael Herr’s book *Dispatches* (1977).<sup>4</sup> This legacy of the Vietnam war can be traced in Jean Baudrillard’s provocative contention that the Gulf War did not take place<sup>5</sup>, through to the era of the embedded war journalist. My interest here, however, is in the aesthetics of “happenings” themselves, and how this informs the increased blurring of art and life in Mailer’s non-fiction and films in the later half of the decade. To best understand Mailer’s remarks on the “happening”, the original context of debates about art and popular protest that were extant in the sixties needs to be recovered.

The “happening” was a form of unscripted theatrical performance that is now associated with a particular cultural image of sixties’ experimentalism. For the foremost Marxist theorist of postmodernism Fredric Jameson, happenings, however much they are of their time, were emblematic of the whole spirit of sixties’ theatrical culture. Two aspects of sixties’ theatrical experimentation interest Jameson. First, theatre’s move away from the play-text leaves, in the most extreme case of the happening, an aesthetic of “the sheerest performance as such, which also paradoxically seeks to abolish the boundary and the distinction between fiction and fact, or art and life”.<sup>6</sup> But second, Jameson argues that even its least overtly political forms, the importance of sixties’ theatricality resides in its aesthetic of political protest, the global context for which was the war in Vietnam:

Theatrical innovation then also staged itself as the symbolic gesture of aesthetic protest, as formal innovation grasped in terms of social and political protest as such, above and beyond the specifically aesthetic and theatrical terms in which the innovation was couched.<sup>7</sup>

The notion of art as “theatre” in this political sense for Jameson informs the “end of art” debates of the period, a key flashpoint in the decade’s disputes over the legacy of modernism. The New Journalism’s blend of fact and fiction was one of

the key innovations of the period, and was often directly linked to the broader spirit of “social and political protest” (although Tom Wolfe is an important conservative counter-example). *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*, Mailer’s account of the 1967 anti-Vietnam march on the Pentagon, is both an exploration of civil disobedience at its most “theatrical”, and a formally experimental work of subjective reportage. A landmark of the non-fiction novel, *The Armies of the Night* is also an example of what Linda Hutcheon calls “historiographic metafiction”, a style of literature which interrogates the processes of historical narrative by means of fictional devices.<sup>8</sup> *The Armies of the Night* accommodates self-reflexivity alongside surrealistic description and parodies of the nineteenth century novel, but its most famous innovation was Mailer’s use of himself as the third person protagonist “Mailer”.

The book is both a literary performance, and the culmination of Mailer’s experiments in forms of self-promotion and self-criticism. But this performativity is intimately connected, in political and stylistic terms, to the theatricality of anti-Vietnam protest. The cultural and political significance of mass organised protest in the last forty years inaugurates with the Vietnam war. The protesters were composed of a variety of anti-war constituencies, but the March was orchestrated as a theatrical happening by key figures of the New Left such as David Dellinger, Jerry Rubin, and Abbie Hoffmann. Mailer describes the New Left’s surrealist politics as a “new style of revolution – revolution by theater and without a script” (249). The most ambitious of these surrealist interventions was an attempt, organised by Hoffmann, to levitate the Pentagon by forming around it a “ring of exorcism”. This was not successful, naturally, but much like the March itself it was a highly televisual form of symbolic protest against the military-industrial complex, or, depending on taste, an ineffective Situationist-style prank.

Mailer’s own public theatricality directly influenced Rubin and Hoffmann. Mailer’s connection to the New Left began with his speech at an anti-war rally at Berkeley on May 2 1965, delivered in front of 20, 000 students. A relatively early adopter of an anti-Vietnam position among intellectuals, Mailer had already couched political protest

in somewhat theatrical terms. The speech at Berkeley was a prototype of absurdist theatre that warned Lyndon Johnson that his current policies would compel student radicals to paste pictures of the president “everywhere, upside down”.<sup>10</sup> This is a literal example of what Guy Debord called *détournement* (a “turning-round”, or more figuratively a derailment), a subversive reappropriation of the images of political and capitalist spectacle. The D.I.Y. aesthetics of Situationist *détournement* are common currency in our social media era of immediate creation and dissemination of images, though arguably the radical intention of seeking to disrupt or “jam” the system of symbolic representation itself has become somewhat diffuse in our time. What was enabling for the New Left about Mailer’s Berkeley speech, however, was that it was an act of patriarchal subversion. Jerry Rubin said of Mailer that “What he was really doing was giving us permission to insult a father figure, indicating it’s okay to ridicule the President”.<sup>11</sup> Mailer obtained his satirical effect by rhetorically adopting the role of the encouraging-but-scolding father to New Left radicals. This paternal relationship to the New Left would be developed further in *The Armies of the Night*.

Two days before the march on the Pentagon, Mailer gave a speech at a fund-raiser in Washington’s Ambassador Theatre, where he gave a master-class in his own style of theatrical role-playing. Mailer harangued his liberal anti-war audience in the persona of President Johnson’s “dwarf alter ego”, and confessed publicly to urinating on the theatre’s bathroom floor. *Time* magazine described this performance as a “scatological solo”, and, as Mailer explained to William F. Buckley on *Firing Line*, part of his strategy in *The Armies of the Night* was to challenge the *Time* account of the evening:

If you insist upon looking at everything I do in my book on a superficial basis you’ll find that the *Time* magazine version is accurate. But what I was interested in is that the real quality of experience is never captured, not only by *Time* but by everything that *Time* stands for, in other words that kind of journalism that appropriates experience rather than entering it [...]  
Earlier, they talked of me engaging in a “scatological solo”, an extraordinarily ambiguous remark. I mean, what was I doing, acting like a monkey, throwing gobbets? That’s what you get

from the idea of a scatological solo, whereas the confession I made that night was about micturition. There is a physical, spiritual, and probably philosophical difference between scatological matters and acts of micturition.<sup>12</sup>

The first thing that is affirmed here is a fairly conventional tenet of the New Journalism: that subjective narrative more directly approaches the “real quality of experience” than the “objective” discourses of newspaper journalism. But perhaps only Mailer would hang so much on the distinction between scatology and “acts of micturition”. As we have already seen, however, Mailer takes the body very seriously as a physical site of metaphor, even where the performance is, as here, purposively offensive. Mailer’s comic confession in *The Armies of the Night* decodes his performance in terms of the book’s broader themes. Mailer confesses to his “Götterdämmerung of a urination” (42), because, he says, “tomorrow they will blame that puddle of water on Communists” (63). Mailer is clearly satirising Cold War anxieties about sanitation and infiltration here.<sup>13</sup> But there is also a primitivist and mythic meaning given to urine here, which is pointed to by Mailer’s metamorphosis into “the Beast” (42). In a famous passage from *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud speculated that the primal moment of civilization was itself connected to an “infantile” desire to urinate:

It is as though primal man had the habit, when he came in contact with fire, of satisfying an infantile desire connected with it, by putting it out with a stream of his urine. The legends that we possess leave no doubt about the originally phallic view taken of tongues of flame as they shoot upwards. Putting out fire by micturating – a theme to which modern giants, Gulliver in Lilliput and Rabelais’ Gargantua, still hark back – was therefore a kind of sexual act with a male, an enjoyment of sexual potency in homosexual competition. The first person to renounce this desire and spare the fire was able to carry it off with him and subdue it to his own use.<sup>14</sup>

Freud’s mythological account of the dawn of civilization ties in with a broader interest in urination in the avant-garde, from Duchamp’s readymade urinal *Fountain* through to Warhol’s urochrome paintings.<sup>15</sup> Mailer’s performance at the Ambassador is of

course a hyper-masculine act of aesthetic affront: it is as if he is *rhetorically* spraying on his audience. Infantile regression is nevertheless often also a form of protest, and Mailer gives this a political slant by attributing his wayward aim to the drinking of Southern Bourbon and, through this, his channelling of the “secret soul” (63) of Lyndon Johnson. The Vietnam conflict is here satirised, in a reversal of the Freudian equation between civilization and the primitive, as an act of aggressive, erectile mastery over nature. Vietnam represents for Mailer the triumph of America as “technology land” over Third World “peasant lore”, and, in another symbolic inversion, urine becomes the stolen symbolic fire of napalm dispensed in Asia. What Mailer thinks of as technological civilization’s “Faustian” urge to dominate nature is here applied to America’s misdirected foreign policy: “Man”, Mailer says, “might be a fool who peed in the wrong pot” (44).

Mailer’s performance thus thematises the big ideas of *The Armies of the Night*: civilization, capitalism, and technology. But there is also the specifically confrontational aspect of this style of performance, something that Mailer had derived in part from the comedian Lenny Bruce<sup>16</sup>, but was also a constituent part of the aesthetic of happenings. Happenings assaulted the bourgeois theatrical convention of the fourth wall by literally abolishing the line between audience and performer (water, for example, might be thrown onto the audience, physically puncturing the illusionistic *mise en scène*). This aspect of happenings again seems very of its time, but what it raises is the question of “seriousness”, which is a central theme in *The Armies of the Night*. By assaulting theatrical convention, happenings sought to highlight that social and public life itself is “conventional”, that is, constructed through privileged frames of discourse. One of the implications of the happening, and of Mailer’s appearance at the Ambassador, is that “seriousness” is in a *formal* sense ideological, since it requires a concern for custom and decorum which is conservative even when its explicit *content* is “radical”. Mailer’s ambivalent description of Dwight Macdonald’s speech at the Ambassador is in essence an exploration of this theme.

The irony is that so much of the rhetorical effect of Mailer's speech at the Ambassador is predicated precisely on a certain public perception of him as an established and serious intellectual and man of letters. It is striking just how much of *The Armies of the Night* is devoted to the politics of literary reputation. The book's pen portraits of literary and intellectual figures are far closer to the conventional nineteenth century "novel of manners" than anything in *An American Dream*. Mailer lays bare the snobbery and ambition of the literary establishment, which is of course also his own snobbery and ambition. Literature is presented as a game of social positioning and cachet, of success as measured by critical approval and gossip column chatter. Mailer's narcissism is, as always, tempered by a generosity of judgement in respect of certain figures such as Lowell, while displaying a competitive contempt for the literary world in general. But "seriousness" here has a political dimension that goes beyond literary reputation or media image. Mailer, Robert Lowell, and Dwight Macdonald all felt that their participation in the march, and their potential arrests, would be effective in lending legitimacy to the anti-war movement because of their public respectability as literary "notables". Moreover, this had legal consequences. Mailer's relatively heavy custodial sentence is justified by the US Commissioner precisely on the grounds of his "seriousness":

"Mr Mailer,' said the Commissioner, 'I view your case with somewhat more seriousness than the average case before me today. You are a mature man, responsible for your ideas, well-known, and you exert influence upon many young people'.  
(230).

The US Commissioner's legal judgement also acknowledges Mailer's paternal influence on the New Left. *The Armies of the Night* would become "the bible of the Movement"<sup>17</sup>, despite its strain of cultural conservatism such as its hostility to counter-cultural lifestyle choices such as LSD. Mailer's adopted tone is often one of unhip scolding paternalism. As Joseph Wenke notes, "The opening pages of the book are replete with the colourful and energetic statement of conservative positions, each of which is calculated to attack

one's perception of Mailer as the Hip left radical".<sup>18</sup> But while in a rhetorical sense some of these stances are calculated, Mailer articulates for the first time in this book a much more nuanced political position which he calls Left-Conservative, a position that is as sincere as it is difficult to summarise. What is notable about this articulation in *The Armies of the Night* is how the book dramatises left-conservatism in terms of Mailer's peculiar position in sixties' culture. Irving Howe, in his famous attack on the counter-culture "The New York Intellectuals", virtually takes Mailer as a special case of the "new sensibility" intellectual, a wayward talent gone astray (Howe, who published "The White Negro" in *Dissent*, himself felt some paternal responsibility: in any case, he regretted his "scoop").<sup>19</sup> Mailer's bridging position in the culture wars is a constant theme of *The Armies of the Night*: dancing along with the shamanistic proto-punk of The Fugs at one moment, dining with Lowell and Macdonald at another.

Within this context of the culture wars, *The Armies of the Night* dramatises an entire dialectic of alignments and resistances. Mailer's preoccupation throughout the book is not only with the aesthetics of dissent, but also of dissent's uneasy relationship to aesthetics. His involvement with the march came as a response to a call from Mitch Goodman, whose group Resist had organised a draft-card burning before the march. Mailer's first instinct is to scold Goodman about "the redundancy of these projects. When was everyone going to cut out the nonsense and get to work, do their own real work? One's own literary work was the only answer to the war in Vietnam" (19). This position of aesthetic detachment, which is both affirmed and belied by the very fact of the book itself, parades its political intentions at every turn, of course. But what Mailer is articulating here is a form of the artistic "silence, exile, and cunning" he had first given notice of in "Our Country and Our Culture". Mailer's preferred function for the artist-intellectual has a long history, one which has been outlined by Edward Said. For Said, "the intellectual always stands between loneliness and alignment"<sup>20</sup>, a sentiment that Mailer expresses with a hint of self-pity: "he, Mailer, ex-revolutionary, now last of the small entrepreneurs, Left Conservative, that lonely flag" (203). In *Representations of*

*the Intellectual*, Said writes:

It is in modern public life seen as a novel or drama and not as a business or as the raw material for a sociological monograph that we can most readily see and understand how it is that intellectuals are representative, not just of some subterranean or large social movement, but of a quite peculiar, even abrasive style of life and social performance that is uniquely theirs.<sup>21</sup>

Said notes that the modern category of the intellectual recurs in realist and modernist fiction, citing in particular Turgenev, Flaubert, and Joyce. Quite aside from his commitments to “silence, exile, and cunning”, however, there is a particular formal emphasis placed by Mailer on the idea of “modern public life as seen as a novel”.

Mailer’s view of “history as a novel, the novel as history” is the pretext both for political participation and a certain creative fictionalising which is also a form of self-invention and role-play. The chiasmus in the subtitle announces the dialectical cast of his approach to historiography in ways that are compatible both with the linguistic style of the novel, and his own performance within it:

The March on the Pentagon was an ambiguous event whose essential value or absurdity may not be established for ten or twenty years, or indeed ever. So to place the real principals, David Dellinger, or Jerry Rubin, in the center of our portrait could prove misleading. They were serious men, devoted to hard detailed work; their position in these affairs, precisely because it was central, can resolve nothing of the ambiguity. For that, an eyewitness who is a participant but not a vested partisan is required, further he must be not only involved, but ambiguous in his own proportions, a comic hero, which is to say, one cannot happily resolve the emphasis of the category – is he finally comic, a ludicrous figure with mock-heroic associations; or is he not unheroic, and therefore embedded somewhat tragically in the comic? Or is he both at once, and all at once? These questions, which probably are not much more answerable than the very ambiguities of the event, at least help to recapture the precise feel of the ambiguity of the event and its monumental disproportions. Mailer is a figure of monumental disproportions and so serves willy nilly as the bridge – many will say the *pons asinorum* into the crazy house, the



crazy mansion, of that historical moment when a mass of the citizenry – not much more than a mob – marched on a bastion which symbolized the military might of the Republic. (67-68).

Mailer's style here is at its most dialectically questioning, setting up its oppositions and counter-claims within the rolling sub-clauses of the long sentence. Here, Mailer plays the Talmudist as secular historian. There are a number of dialectical tensions at work in this passage, but a central one is the distinction between Mailer's tragic-comic role and that of the "serious" work of the organisers. As a mediating "eyewitness", Mailer seems to want to resist identification with any one position or constituency, to be a "participant but not a vested partisan". This is a classic position of the intellectual, and one of the artistic benefits of Mailer's Left-Conservatism is there is always the option of crossing the "bridge" to see the view from the other side.

Mailer's roleplaying here, however, also belongs to another tradition within modernism, that of the *flâneur* or dandy, a figure commonly associated with Charles Baudelaire and famously theorised by Walter Benjamin. Benjamin's *flâneur*, or stroller, finds his distinctive style of social existence in his observation of the flow of the crowd in capitalist society, exhibited in the spectacle of good and consumers that inhabit Baudelaire's famous Paris arcades. In his persona as hyper-masculine literary lion, Mailer embodied a distinctive style of the 'new sensibility' dandy. It is counter-intuitive to think of Mailer in terms of the very sixties kind of aesthetic self-invention which can be seen in diverse figures such as Sontag, Warhol and Tom Wolfe. Yet his style of self-advertisement does have its own kind of flamboyance. And dandyism was perfectly suited to the 'new sensibility' in taste. Dandyism is primarily a taste for making distinctions in relation to the amorphous mass of the crowd, an alternation of a love of popular culture and styles with a dismissive elitism. Sontagian Camp was a "democratized" variation on this theme, while Pop largely overturned its terms. *The Armies of the Night* in its own way enacts this democratic-elitist strain in the 'new sensibility'.

Hannah Arendt writes of the dandy that "It is to him, aimlessly strolling through

the crowds in the big cities in studied contrast to their hurried purposeful activity, that things reveal themselves in their secret meaning”.<sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin characterised the dandy attitude to the crowd in similar terms: “He becomes their accomplice even as he dissociates himself from them. He becomes deeply involved with them only to relegate them to oblivion with a glance of contempt”.<sup>24</sup> This in a nutshell is the central note of Mailer’s account of the March. The book updates the dandy from the bustling streets of everyday commercial urban life to a particular kind of modern mass spectacle, the anti-war demonstration. His sketches of individuals and of the protestors as a mass elaborate tiny but telling distinctions between the narrator and his subjects. One of the effects of this “narcissism of small differences” is that Mailer develops through this strategy a snapshot image of the whole American scene. This individualism also allows a critical standpoint from where Mailer can view, say, the “narcissistic” fragmentation of the contemporary lefts, whose strategic alliance for the March scarcely concealed their differences of style and ideology.

As a mediating “eyewitness”, Mailer dramatises all his characteristic habits of confrontation in a mock-heroic key. But there is also an *ethics* of confrontation at play here. His eye-staring contest with a Norwegian Nazi in the police truck is a small example of the dialectics of “facing”. Mailer is keen to dominate, or at least “not to lose” the encounter: “You claim to have a philosophical system which comprehends all – you know nothing! My eyes encompass yours! My philosophy contains yours. You have met the wrong man!” (162). The philosophical dimension of the eye is here combined with masculine competition. Mailer is writing as a Jew confronting a faintly comic-book version of Nazism. But he is also writing as the democratic self facing its fascist double. And if the eye is a powerful weapon designed to relegate opponents to “oblivion”, it also has a more modest purpose: he “did not hate the Nazi nearly so much as he was curious about him” (162). This is a testament to a gentler and more open function of the eye, to receive knowledge of the other (“facing” is also a form of attention). The purpose of the eye in this sense is to bear witness and to accommodate

divergent points of view. *The Armies of the Night* is committed to a democratic pluralism of viewpoints that places it very firmly in American tradition. Alfred Kazin acclaimed the novel in an early review and compared it favourably to Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*<sup>24</sup> (unlike Mailer's more "troubled" and formally restless works, *The Armies of the Night* was immediately received as that most conservative of things, an American classic).

Mailer regularly calls upon his democratic credentials throughout the novel. The book is punctuated by moments of affirmative populism, and it is at these moments that he calls upon an obscene but essentially pastoral spirit of America. A consistent critic of patriotism, Mailer is also a consistent dissenting patriot. This patriotism expresses itself contrary to an establishment-stamped "official" patriotism, the "patriotic unendurable fix of the television programs and the newspapers" (47). Rather, the American spirit Mailer admires is bottom-up, democratic, and instinctively and easily anti-authoritarian:

[the] noble common man was obscene as an old goat, and his obscenity was what saved him. The sanity of said common democratic man was in his humor, his humor was in his obscenity. And his philosophy as well – a reductive philosophy which looked to restore the hard edge of proportion to the overblown values overhanging each small military existence – viz: being forced to salute an overconscientious officer with your back stiffened into an exaggerated posture. "That Lieutenant is chickenshit," would be the platoon verdict, and a blow had somehow been struck for democracy and the sanity of good temper (61)

Mailer's identification with the "common democratic man" was decisively influenced by his experiences in World War II which he had drawn on for *The Naked and the Dead*. This is a democracy of vernacular language and gestural resistance, engineered by masculine self-control of emotions and body. Mailer's joy in the obscene vulgarity of the American vernacular is a joy in the rough "philosophy" it reveals:

What was magnificent about the word shit is that it enabled you to use the word noble: a skinny Southern cracker with a beatific smile on his face saying in the dawn in a Filipino rice

paddy, 'Man, I just managed to take me a noble shit.' Yeah, that was Mailer's America. If he was going to love something in the country, he would love that. (61-62).

There is something here of Orwell's description of the English working classes in "England, Your England". Like Orwell, Mailer is speaking here as an intellectual and class outsider, and his depiction is laced with a nostalgic affection but is in the last analysis unsentimental. The unlisted man taking a "noble shit" in the "Filipino rice paddy" is the servant of an American military power that Mailer, in 1967, fully opposes.

It would seem that for all his celebration of a democratic vernacular, Mailer is unable to conjure up a picture here that does not carry the ironic freight of a postmodern black humour, despite his sincere identification with that masculine spirit. *The Naked and the Dead's* revision of popular front realism seems a stylistic and political door that is finally closed. The lasting traumatic significance of the Vietnam war in American society was a product of a period of historic political and class realignments. The white working classes, in this version of the cultural narrative, became in this period politically and militarily positioned against the progressive currents of sixties' culture such as civil rights and anti-war politics. Mailer does not align himself with the liberal stigmatisation of the Southern working classes. Yet the political trajectory from *The Naked and the Dead* is clear. Richard Godden has put the problem like this: "Between 1948 and 1967 it would seem that neither the problem nor the plot has much changed: with the nascent liberal impulse dead and the working class bound to the state, what, apart from corporatism, can form the national future?"<sup>25</sup> Godden's brilliant economic reading of *The Armies of the Night* as a fiction of capital and of the triumph of the military-industrial complex can also be extended to take into account the role of spectacle at play here. As I have argued, *The Naked and the Dead* tracked the failure of popular front liberalism and its imminent supplanting by an accelerated world of consumption and spectacle. This was predicated upon an image of the soldier – read, worker – as alienated subject of the culture industry. It is against this background that the "armies of the night" were staging their politics of spectacle in the form of the

“happening”.

Mailer’s political sympathies are of course with the anti-war New Left. Yet he is markedly ambivalent about the counter-cultural aesthetics of the “armies of the night”. Mailer observes the hippy movement as a “dress ball” of cultural styles:

The hippies were there in great number, perambulating down the hill, many dressed like the legions of Sgt. Pepper’s band [...] There were soldiers in Foreign Legion uniforms, and tropical bush jackets, San Quentin and Chino, California striped shirt and pants, British copies of Eisenhower jackets, hippies dressed like Turkish shepherds and Roman senators, gurus, and samurai in dirty smocks. They were close to being assembled from all the intersections between history and the comic books, between legend and television, the Biblical archetypes and the movies.  
(108-109)

Mailer’s enjoyment of this spectacle is based on the recognition of a surrealist political aesthetic in this “army of a thousand costumes” (109). This is the “happening” writ large. What, then, grounds Mailer’s ambivalence? Here there are a number of potential readings. A conservative reading might point to Mailer’s opposition to a televisual generation brought up in what he sees as a culture of interruption. Historical narrative is thus for Mailer being jammed by the carnivalesque montage of spectacle. The key absurdist text in this respect for Mailer is Nathaniel West’s Hollywood novel *The Day of the Locust* (1939), a novel that depicts the crowd at a film premiere as a swarming orgy of unruly consumer energy. Rita Barnard has written about what she calls West’s aesthetics of the “cultural parade”<sup>26</sup>, and it is this aspect of West that Mailer draws on in his many allusions to *The Day of the Locust* in his sixties’ work.<sup>27</sup> This is thus a reprise of an old theme: the simultaneously radical and totalitarian potential of the mass.

Mailer’s ambivalent relationship to the counter-culture is nonetheless part of the much larger argument about technology, capital, and aesthetics he is making in this book:

the aesthetic at last was in the politics – the dress ball was going into battle. Still, there were nightmares beneath the gaiety of these middle class runaways, these Crusaders, going out to

attack the hard core of technology land with less training than armies were once offered by a medieval assembly ground. The nightmare was in the echo of those trips which had fractured their sense of past and present. If nature was a veil whose tissue had been ripped by static, screams of jet motors, the highway grid of the suburbs, smog, defoliation, pollution of streams, overfertilization of earth, anti-fertilization of women, and the radiation of two decades of near blind atom busting, then perhaps the history of the past was another tissue, spiritual no doubt, without physical embodiment, unless its embodiment was in the cuneiform hieroglyphics of the chromosome (so much like primitive writing!) but that tissue of past history, whether traceable in the flesh, or merely palpable in the collective underworld of the dream, was nonetheless being bombed by the use of LSD as outrageously as the atoll of Eniwetok, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the scorched foliage of Vietnam. (109-110)

The sense in the above passage is of a closure, of an imminent total mediation of nature and the American landscape by the anti-aesthetics of Urban Renewal and corporate architecture (a surprising romantic ecology is at work here). Vietnam stands in for Mailer as a logical extension of this process to the Third World, which he opposes because of its destruction of a “rich peasant lore” (208). At this point we might return to Jameson:

late capitalism in general (and the 60s in particular) constitute a process in which the last surviving internal and external zones of precapitalism – the last vestiges of noncommodified or traditional space within and outside the advanced world – are now ultimately penetrated and colonized in their turn. Late capitalism can therefore be described as the moment when the last vestiges of Nature which survived into classical capitalism are at length eliminated: namely the Third World and the unconscious.<sup>28</sup>

Jameson gives this triumphant moment of late capitalism a specific year and context: 1967 and the global protests against the war in Vietnam. And it is this perception that informs Mailer’s scepticism about New Left radicalism. Mailer the cultural conservative condemns LSD explicitly in the terms of Jameson’s “precapitalist zones”, the Third

World and the unconscious. Yet, in another sense Mailer rejects the Marxist-Hegelian totality of Jameson's retrospective narrative:

The new generation believed in technology more than any before it, but the generation also believed in LSD, in witches, in tribal knowledge, in orgy, and revolution. It had no respect whatsoever for the unassailable logic of the next step: belief was reserved for the revelatory mystery of the happening where you did not know what was going to happen next. (103)

Mailer identifies the anti-authoritarian New Left, with its conflation of revolution and revelation, with his own brand of apocalyptic politics. Happenings are thus for Mailer an affirmation of a radical and messianic conception of history, which he delivers in the book's concluding image of an America "heavy with child", bearing either a totalitarian future or a utopian "new world" (320).

Mailer's politics, even at its most conservative and pessimistic, is that of a romantic, aestheticised anti-capitalism. A comparison might be made here with a quite different figure, Pier Paolo Pasolini, whose short film for Unesco *The Walls of Sana'a* (1971), is a plea against the aesthetic destruction of the Third World. A similar global process is being registered here from America to Vietnam, from Italy to Yemen. Mightn't, however, a Marxist analysis be brought to bear on Mailer's own position as an intellectual? In *The Armies of the Night*, Mailer casts himself in the role of numerous variations on the modernist subject. But as Jameson observes, modernist individualism can itself be read as one of the "handicraft enclaves"<sup>29</sup> within the broader pattern of capitalist development. Mailer adopts a huge repertoire of roles in the book, many of which have the flavour of the artisan or the small businessman. His self-description as "last of the small entrepreneurs" is a suggestive indicator of such an artisanal role. *The Armies of the Night* reads today less as a road-map or bible for today's political movements, as it does a literary-historical document of its times. Contemporary protest movements are increasingly about depersonalisation and anonymous nomadic networks. Loosely activist collectives such as Anonymous exist as decentralised cyber-

communities, and are in a proper sense virtual, but are an important force behind the Occupy movement and cyber-activists Lulzsec. Yet perhaps an aesthetic of the happening is still relevant here. Perhaps the closest recent contemporary culture comes to Mailer's scolding-nurturing paternalism is Slavoj Žižek's relationship to Occupy Wall Street. Žižek, like Mailer, is wary of an untheorised narcissism in contemporary protest, which he also relates to the hippy legacies of the happening. Left-conservatism still has its avatars.<sup>30</sup>

*The death of the modernist subject: movies, fiction, journalism*

*The Armies of the Night* is a defining Mailer performance, but his writing and film-making of the late sixties is preoccupied precisely with the death of the modernist subject. The most notable of his avant-garde films, *Maidstone* (1970), is thematically an exploration of the death of the author through the plotted assassination of its fictional film-director, presidential hopeful Norman T. Kingsley. In the film's most famous scene, Rip Torn made an assassination attempt that was both symbolic and real: to symbolically kill the fictional "Kingsley", Torn physically assaulted and wounded Mailer with a hammer. The animal distress and macho verbal combat that follows is always slipping in and out of the registers of the real and the performative. But for me what elevates this scene from its avant-garde prankiness and masculine role-playing is the unfeigned chorus of distress from Mailer's daughters, whose cries of "Daddy!" humanise the film's paternal themes. The play-acting of the death of the author takes on a particular pathos and realism here.

Mailer's fiction of the period is also interested in the death of the paternal author. *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (1967) is a postmodern fiction of the late capitalist frontier. The novel is an account of an Alaskan bear hunt narrated by D.J., son of a Texan oil millionaire. While clearly an allegory of the generational conflicts of the late sixties, Vietnam is only fleetingly mentioned on the novel's last page. An oblique retelling of William Faulkner's novella "The Bear", the story-telling is heavily influenced by William





**Fig. 10. Still from *Maidstone* (1970). Rip Torn and Mailer's famous brawl enacts the "death" of the author.**

Burroughs' cut-up techniques (though the basic composition was conventional). D.J. is the narrator as cut-up artist, a "Disc Jockey to America"<sup>31</sup> jamming the conventions of the American novel with ad interruptions, radio signals, quotations from pop culture, obscenity, and postmodern self-reflexivity. Just as the Alaskan landscape is mediated and colonised by the electronic circuits of late capital<sup>32</sup>, D.J.'s narrative consciousness is colonised by comic books and the movies. Critics have frequently noted an apparent political paradox in the work: while D.J. is ostensibly a voice of the counter-culture, by the end of the novel he and his friend Tex are "off to meet the wizard in Vietnam" (224). One clue to this paradox lies in the novel's ambiguous relationship to paternal authority. On the one hand, the narrative is a polymorphously perverse assault on the paternal values of the father, the conservative values of white Texan masculinity: "He, Rusty, is fucked unless he gets that bear, for if he don't, white men are fucked more and they can take no more" (116). However, D.J.'s oedipal assault on the father is only secondarily about political values. Its primary cause is a traumatic disillusionment with a paternal violence with which D.J. fully identifies. This identification is symbolised by the bear itself in all its divine animality. When Rusty shoots the bear while D.J. has it in his sights, and takes credit for the kill, D.J. reads this as panic rather than an act of courage. The consequence is a recognition of paternal lack and the "end of love of one son for one father" (157). The symbolic death/castration of the father is what propels

D.J. and Tex into the Alaskan woods to face the Grizzly bear which substitutes for the lost paternal superego: “God was a beast, not a man, and God said, ‘Go out and kill – fulfill my will, go and kill’” (219). One answer to the question *Why Are We in Vietnam?* might be the codes of the American novel itself. The homoerotic subtext of the classic American boys’ tale<sup>33</sup> is here simultaneously exposed and resolved through this intimate confrontation with the violent animal superego. Edenic boyhood innocence and intimacy is disavowed and its incestuous energy channeled into forging the unit of the primal killer band heading out to Vietnam: “they were twins, never to be near as lovers again, but killer brothers” (219). The obscene exposure of the father’s political values (allegorically, the politics of LBJ and American imperialism) occurs not despite but because D.J. has introjected an even more primitive and severe version of those values. Slavoj Žižek has written about this paradox in a reading of a much later Vietnam work, Stanley Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* (1987):

The second, main part of the film ends with a scene in which a soldier (Matthew Modine) who, throughout the film, has displayed a kind of ironic “human distance” towards the military machine (on his helmet, the inscription ‘Born to kill’ is accompanied by the peace sign, etc – in short, it looks as if he has stepped right out of MASH!), shoots a wounded Vietcong sniper girl. He is the one in whom the interpellation by the military big Other has fully succeeded; he is the fully constituted military subject.

The lesson is therefore clear: an ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it.<sup>34</sup>

*Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968) is a book length account of the 1968 political conventions held at Miami Beach and Chicago. In Chicago, the symbolic and real activism of New Left anti-Vietnam protestors was met by physical force in a crackdown orchestrated by Chicago’s Democrat Mayor Daley and involving the police and the National Guard. A more conventional work of political reportage than *The Armies of the Night*, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* also activates a subtle shift in Mailer’s historical sense.

Replacing the multiple identities of *Armies* is a single relatively detached point of view, that of the “reporter”:

So the reporter stood in the center of the American scene – how the little dramas of America, like birds, seemed to find themselves always in the right nest – and realized he was going through no more than the rearrangement of some intellectual luggage (which indeed every good citizen might be supposed to perform) during those worthy operations of the democratic soul when getting ready to vote.<sup>34</sup>

The mood here is more reflective, less “active” than *The Armies of the Night*, partly because this time round he wasn’t prepared to risk arrest, but more pressingly Mailer had sensed a shift in America’s political mood. Mailer’s apocalyptic historicism is beginning to be balanced by a longer view of history as irony. In *Why Are We at War?* (2003), Mailer gives a concise account of this attitude: “You know, the older you get, the more you begin to depend upon irony as the last human element you can rely on. Whatever exists will, sooner or later, turn itself inside out”.<sup>35</sup> In *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, the long perspective sits within the immediate details of political life at its most “conventional”, the practical politics of delegates, press conferences, and platforms, and underlying this “those sensuous worlds of corruption, promiscuity, fingers in the take, political alliances forged by the fires of booze, and that sense of property which is the fundament of all political relations” (89).

The thesis of “politics as property” is at the centre of Mailer’s account of the Chicago convention. Mailer’s obvious affection is for the “dignity” (123) and idealism of the candidacy of Eugene McCarthy, a writer’s candidate who Mailer meets in a restaurant “in that hard hour after he had relinquished the last of his hopes” (127). And yet it is just this refusal of “those sensuous worlds” – McCarthy, he writes, was “seeking to destroy politics as property” (124) – that Mailer sees as the root of the Left’s present crisis. The 1968 election is generally regarded as a defining election in modern American politics for its shifting of the boundaries of political constituency in America. Thirty

years later, Mailer lamented that the Democrats were no longer the natural party of the working class after 1968, and argued that the Democratic party had still not recovered from the political traumas of the period.<sup>37</sup> In a prophetic moment in *Miami and the Siege of Chiago*, he writes that “the Left had not yet learned to talk across the rugged individualism of the more rugged in America, the Left was still too full of kicks and pot and the freakings of sodium amytol and orgy, the howls of electronics and LSD. The Left could also find room to grow up” (62). He is testy, too, about Black Power, “weary to the bone of listening to Black cries of Black superiority in sex, Black superiority in beauty, Black superiority in war” (52).

All of this would confirm Robert Merrill’s view that the book consolidates Mailer’s “growing personal conservatism”.<sup>38</sup> But while Mailer allows himself to wonder if he is a “closet Republican” (52), his particular target is the corporate version of “rugged individualism”: in effect, what would become Reaganism. For Mailer also identifies in 1968 a schism in the Right: “the small-town faith in small free enterprise would run smash into the corporate juggernauts of technology land; their love of polite culture would collide with the mad aesthetics of the new America” (62). The “mad aesthetics” are manifested in the Westian landscape of Miami Beach:

For ten miles, from the Diplomat to the Di Lido, above Hallendale Beach Boulevard down to Lincoln Mall, all the white refrigerators stood, piles of white refrigerator six and eight and twelve stories high, twenty stories high, shaped like sugar cubes and ice-cube trays on edge, like mosques and palaces, shaped like matched white luggage and portable radios, stereos, shaped like the baffle plates on white plastic electric heaters, and cylinders like Waring blenders, buildings looking like giant op art and pop art paintings, and sweet wedding cakes, cottons of kitsch and piles of dirty cotton stucco. (12-13)

This Miami for Mailer combines the worst banalities of sixties modernism with an over-sweet Pop aesthetics. Mailer’s ambivalence over certain strains of modernism, especially in architecture, has here bloomed into a full-blown anti-modernism (this description of Miami Beach wouldn’t be out of place in Tom Wolfe’s work). The “mad aesthetics”

of Miami Beach have their counterpart in the televised spectacle of the Republican convention itself. Nixon's nomination in Mailer's eyes is a grotesque media event. Nixon by 1968 has become "the spirit of television" (79), with Reagan waiting in the wings. Packaged for national broadcast, the conventions are highly "spectacular" (the Nixonettes; an elephant defecating on the floor of the Republican conference).

But the conventions are not, Mailer insists, the real "event". This "event" is the violence in the streets of Chicago. In the book's opening metaphor, Mailer describes Chicago's famous stockyards as a species of modern inferno. In an ironic historical echo of Upton Sinclair's socialist novel *The Jungle* (1906), the stockyards in Mailer's account symbolises the violence of Chicago political machine under the dynastic Democrat mayor Richard Daley. With two weeks to write the account of the convention for *Harper's* before election day, and wary of the risk of injury or arrest, Mailer views the "event" from his room in the Conrad Hilton: "watching it from a window on the nineteenth floor, there was something of the detachment of studying a storm at evening under glass" (164). This detachment is the keynote of *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, as Mailer wonders where his "true engagement" lies. The answer he seems to want to offer is that is in the patient work of writing. *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* is an intelligent and thrilling example of "live" history, and Mailer's major contribution to the American sub-genre of political convention literature (Christopher Hitchens has called Mailer the "last of the great political-convention essayists"<sup>39</sup>). And despite his protests to the contrary, there is room for Mailer-esque comic heroism: a rousing speech in Grant Park; a scuffle, an arrest, and a trip to the Playboy mansion. The result is gonzo enough, but in terms of the comic heroic model of participation offered in *The Armies of the Night* the book lacks for both political and personal investment.

*The end of the decade: Of A Fire on the Moon*

*Of A Fire On the Moon* (1970) is a haunted and philosophically restless meditation on Mailer's most apocalyptic ideas about technology, civilization, and the cultural soul in

sixties' America. The Apollo 11 mission was, Mailer thought, "the spookiest adventure in history"<sup>40</sup>, and so posed the most essential questions about America and mankind's most romantic dreams of a progressive future. In *Of A Fire on the Moon* Mailer takes seriously the utopianism of the era by adopting "Aquarius" as his literary identity. Yet he also displays deep misgivings about the moon landings as a technological and spiritual adventure. These misgivings are partly theodical, grounded in Mailer's embattled vision of a God and Devil in conflict: "Man was voyaging to the planets in order to look for God. Or was it to destroy him?" (76). But Mailer also sensed a banality in the moon landings. The astronauts were heroic pioneers of a new American future, but Mailer also sees in his pen portraits of Armstrong, Aldrin and Collins the triumph of the corporate WASP version of rugged individualism.

*Of A Fire On the Moon* sees Mailer at his most millennial, grieving over the vestigial traces of the romantic spirit (marked here by the death of Hemingway) as it confronts a new stage in the age of the machine. Joseph Tabbi has argued that the "loss of ego" Mailer experiences in this book is related to his confrontation of the full force of the postmodern sublime. Vertiginously surrounded by NASA's technologies, Mailer experiences what Tabbi calls a "feeling of dread, disembodiment, and conceptual indeterminacy which he then projects onto the very mechanisms of the Apollo 11 rocket".<sup>41</sup> Mailer's disorientation in NASA's Vehicle Assembly Building (VAB) is about the difficulty of cognitively mapping himself within its architectural and perceptual space. Lacking "any familiar sense of recognition" (53) in the VAB, Mailer's dialectical conception of the subject here confronts a Spinozist-Deleuzian system of machinic connections and flows.

One way Mailer thinks this erasure of the subject is in the opposition between "face" and "interface": the face as the ground of subjective recognition is being eclipsed by the impersonal networks of machines. The characteristic Mailer move here is to suggest ways in which human bodies and relationships are mediated and conditioned by the technological logic of interface: "Interface was that no-man's-land where you joined

the mouth of one bag to the mouth of a very different bag. Kissing, for example, was an interface” (164). Mailer is taking seriously here something like the radical Deleuzian notion that the humanist subject is itself decomposable into desiring-machines in the form of connective partial objects (mouth, leg, groin). For Mailerian dialectics, the implications of this postmodern subjectivity are disastrous. If the subject is merely a residue of its machinic connections, then the human aspect of intersubjective intimacy is thus removed from the picture.

Mailer’s project in *Of A Fire on the Moon* is to forge an aesthetic response to this new world of machines. His first step is to renounce egoism: “Do not dominate this experience with your mind was the lesson – look instead to receive its most secret voice” (55). Mailer is not renouncing here his own authorial powers of perception and imagination. Rather, he is attempting to revise the relationship of the novelistic imagination to the technological enterprise. Mailer had studied aeronautical engineering at Harvard, and from NASA’s technical literature he seeks to create a sinuous poetry based on a theory of the “psychology of machines”. *Of A Fire On the Moon* is the first sign of a turn in Mailer’s aesthetics towards an animistic interest in the world of objects. This object-aesthetics would be given an explicitly libidinal form in *The Prisoner of Sex’s* portrait of the spermatozoon on its long journey to the egg, and is perhaps most fully realised in his Egyptian novel *Ancient Evenings*. The fluid subjectivity of *Ancient Evenings* is at times indistinguishable from its immersion in the magical world of objects and commodities.<sup>42</sup>

The moon rockets were, as the writer Mark Simpson suggests<sup>43</sup>, the ultimate fetish objects of Cold War era late capitalism, phallic projections of American egoism. Mailer clearly recognises this aspect of the moon landings. Mailer’s response is not simply to critique this fetishism, however, but to re-establish it on a totemic, magical basis. *Of A Fire On The Moon* presents a spectral vision of the rockets of the Apollo-Saturn as libidinised and spontaneously malfunctioning machines endowed with a temperament and psychology. As primitive objects, the moon surface and the rockets were in contact



not only with a rationalised future but also something older and more magical. A useful comparison here is Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), which is also centrally concerned with the primitive-technological and spiritual-banal impulses of space exploration. Like *Of A Fire On The Moon*, *2001* invests its machines with a certain humanity. In *2001*, this is primarily about personalisation: HAL the super-computer is in some respects more personalised than the astronauts themselves. *Of A Fire On The Moon*, by contrast, is more about an uncanny *libidinal* investment in the machine. This is why what is spooky about Mailer's psychology of machines is paradoxically also something "unhuman", what Slavoj Žižek calls the deathless dimension of drive.<sup>44</sup> Mailer's machines, unlike HAL, are merely humanised at the level of the unconscious, not at the level of affect or personality. Tabbi argues that this psychological investment in the machine is a poetic response to a reductionist view of causality, but the uncanny psychologised machine also represents a *depersonalised* and potentially malign agency.

In its utopian moments, *Of A Fire On The Moon* seeks to forge a creative synthesis of art and science. In *Cannibals and Christians*, Mailer had suggested a common root to artistic and scientific exploration: early scientific pioneers were "adventurers" who accessed the mysteries of creation through metaphor and an expansive "knowledge of life".<sup>45</sup> This model of science (essentially the eighteenth century model) is for Mailer about living fully in the world.<sup>46</sup> The scientist as romantic explorer has been displaced in the twentieth century, however, by an increasing tendency towards specialisation and expertise. *Of A Fire On The Moon* seeks to reconnect the scientific mission to the exploration of "mysteries, forms, projects, riddles, and all of their roots" (270). A preoccupation with forms is for Mailer at the heart of the scientific as well as the aesthetic impulse:

Just as the Greeks could be confident they had discovered the secret of beauty because the aesthetic of their sculptors permitted no blemish to the skin, because their sculptors said in fact that the surface of marble was equal to the surface of skin, so classical physics remained simple because it did not try to deal with anything less than ideal form. Later, Western



aesthetics was sufficiently ambitious to wish to discover the laws of beauty in skins with blemish and bodies with twisted limbs (and indeed would never quite succeed), just indeed as engineering could never prove simple and comprehensible to amateurs. At its best engineering was a judicious mixture of physics and a man's life-experience with machines (200)

Mailer here rehearses the arguments of "The Metaphysics of the Belly" and applies them to science rather than art. Classical physics (the moon expedition was based fully on Newtonian calculations) is here contrasted with the practical materialism of engineering, associated by Mailer with a kind of anti-idealist complexity. What Mailer says about engineering applies even more to quantum universe of particle physics or, say, the speculative mathematical models of string theory. Physics today is in fact an ever more spooky enterprise, and if *Of A Fire On the Moon* has somewhat dated in this regard, Mailer does at least gesture towards the more radical discoveries of post-Newtonian physics. The crucial implication of Mailer's analogy is that the scientist and the artist are both radical explorers of forms: the connective and synthesising eye of the artist has much in common with the scientist in their exploration of the "mysteries" and "riddles" of phenomena. The model artist in *Of A Fire On The Moon* is Cezanne rather than Picasso. In a startling imaginative leap, Mailer compares Cezanne's innovations in the representation of pictorial surface with the surface texture of the moon.

*Of A Fire On The Moon* is also a representative text of the sixties debates about the humanities and science, debates which would anticipate later arguments about postmodernism and science. Intellectuals of the new sensibility such as William Burroughs and Susan Sontag were beginning to welcome the idea of "one culture", a new synthesis of the humanities and science.<sup>47</sup> This humanist hope would by the time of the nineties and the Alan Sokal affair seem like another example of lapsed sixties utopianism. Sokal's publication of a hoax article in the academic journal *Social Text* was followed by a scientific attack on the "intellectual impostures" of postmodern literary theory.<sup>48</sup> The literary critic Patricia Waugh has argued that *Of A Fire on the Moon* is an early example of postmodernism's critique of the limits of positivistic science.<sup>49</sup> But

the book also embraces a spirit of scientific enquiry at the same time as it questions the limits of what it can verify. Mailer writes that

We knew that gravity was an attraction between bodies, and we could measure that attraction, but why they chose to be attracted to one another was nicely out of our measure [...] Metaphors then arise of a charged and libidinous universe with heavenly bodies which attract each other across the silences of space. (152, 207).

From a strictly positivist perspective, Mailer's hypothesis is at best anthropomorphic. But for Mailer the metaphors of the novelist have a similar function to those of dreams in that they are tests or "simulations" (146) that provide "intimations of a reality subtly beneath reality" (148). It's not simply that science and art pose separate, though interlocking, questions about the physical world (in the sense that Waugh means when she calls them "rival paradigms of knowledge"<sup>50</sup>). It is for Mailer about an entire active relationship to questions themselves, about learning "to live with questions" (9) (metaphors, images, hypotheses, mysteries, and unconscious soundings). Keats called this faculty negative capability, and one of the more arresting ideas in *Of A Fire On The Moon* is that science is also about living with questions and working with provisional knowledge. In science, Mailer writes, there was "no final knowledge whatsoever" (152).

Yet *Of A Fire On The Moon* is finally a work of mourning and melancholia, not simply for the romantic spirit or the hope of an adventurous synthesis of art and science, but for the nineteen sixties themselves. The sense of an ending hangs over the book's moving final section "The Age of Aquarius". Mailer's restless summer in Provincetown, and his marital troubles, are sensitive indicators of the *fin de siècle*. The ritualistic burying of a Ford by Mailer's Provincetown friends gives an important clue: what is being buried is Fordist production, out of which will arise the new machines of the space age and the post-Fordist economy. The moon landings represent for Mailer the triumph of WASP dynamism and market values over the counter-cultural sloth of the armies of the night. Mailer is also sensing, perhaps, what will become of the utopian

aspirations of the space age itself. As Mark Simpson notes, the “world was already bored and changing channels in 1970”. The space age, Simpson writes, is on our age much more about a nostalgic past than a sense of the future:

Space just isn't so spacey now. Fifty years after Sputnik flashed through the heavens and gave humankind cause to crick its neck and dream of the stars, we've got other things to think about. Like unanswered emails and all the porn we haven't downloaded yet.<sup>51</sup>

The moon landings, in other words, have become just another fetishised historical moment. Reading *Of A Fire On The Moon* today, its melancholy fits our own sense of an accelerated future that did not happen, or at least turned out rather differently than expected. Nevertheless, Mailer's romantic imagination settles on a last magical object, a three billion year old moon rock insulated by glass panels at MSC. The book ends with a hopeful sense that the moon landings connect with a past and future embedded in deep time.<sup>52</sup>

1. *Cannibals and Christians*, 108-109.
2. *Cannibals and Christians*, 116.
3. *Cannibals and Christians*, 116.
4. Jameson discusses Herr and postmodern warfare in *Postmodernism*, 44.
5. Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Sydney: Power Publications, 1995).
6. Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern 1983-1998* (London, New York: Verso, 1998), 75.
7. *The Cultural Turn*, 75.
8. For Hutcheon, Mailer's self-reflexivity “does not weaken, but on the contrary, strengthens and points to the direct level of historical engagement and reference of the text”. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 117.
9. *The Armies of the Night*, 249. Citations hereafter bracketed in the text.
10. *Cannibals and Christians*, 106.

11. Quoted in Mills 291.
12. “William Buckley Interviews Norman Mailer on Firing Line (1968) Part 2”, *YouTube* 21 July 2009. Web. 18 November 2014.
13. See chapter 2 of this study and Andrew Ross, *No Respect*, 42-47
14. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization, Society and Religion*, 278-279.
15. On Warhol’s urochromes, see Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “A Primer for Urochrome Painting”, *Andy Warhol: the late work* (Munich; New York: Prestel, 2004), 88-97. For a queer reading of the urination theme, see the excerpts from Jonathan Weinberg, “Urination and its Discontents”, *Queer Arts Resource Forum*. Web. 19 November 2014.
16. In her memoir, Adele Mailer writes that “I think Norman was influenced by Lenny’s irreverence and his use of obscenity to shatter a few icons”. *The Last Party*, 290.
17. Quoted in Mills 461.
18. Wenke 143.
19. Howe, *Selected Writings 1950-1990*, 278.
20. Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 22.
21. *Representations of the Intellectual*, 14.
22. Introduction to Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 18.
23. *Illuminations*, 168.
24. Manso 466.
25. Godden 248.
26. Barnard 154.
27. See for example “In the Red Light: A History of the Republican Convention in 1964”, an account of the Barry Goldwater candidacy that is prefaced by a quotation from *Day of the Locust*. In *Cannibals and Christians*, 20.
28. Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 207.
29. Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 307.
30. Slavoj Žižek, “Occupy Wall Street: what is to be done next?”, *The Guardian* 24 April 2012. Web. 18 November 2014.
31. *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, 224. Citations hereafter bracketed in the text.
32. See Fredric Jameson “The Great American Hunter, Or, Ideological Content

in the Novel”, *College English* 34.2 (1972): 180–197. Jameson’s essay on *Why Are We in Vietnam?* and James Dickey’s *Deliverance* predates Ernest Mandel’s *Late Capitalism* and Jameson’s own theorisations of postmodernism, but is essentially a rehearsal for these later arguments. Godden also reads *Why Are We in Vietnam?* as primarily a fiction of capital (183-199).

33. See Leslie Fiedler’s famous essay on the homoerotics of the classic American narrative in “Come Back to the Raft Ag’in, Huck Honey” in *An End to Innocence: Essays on Culture and Politics* (Boston: Beacon, 1955), 142-151. This study will return to Fiedler’s essay in chapter 7.

34. Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London, New York: Verso, 1997), 21.

35. *Miami and the Siege of Chicago: An Informal History of the American Political Conventions of 1968* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 63. Citations hereafter bracketed in the text.

36. *Why Are We At War?*, 96-97. The context here is a rare Mailer statement on Israel and Palestine. See chapter 7.

37. “Norman Mailer - Oh My America (Part 1 Farewell To The Fifties)”.

38. Merrill 137.

39. Christopher Hitchens, “Master of Conventions”, *The Atlantic* September 1 2008. Web. 25 January 2016.

40. *A Fire On The Moon*, 123. Citations hereafter bracketed in the text.

41. Tabbi 3.

42. This object-aesthetics would be pushed even further by Matthew Barney in his Mailer adaptations *Cremaster 2* (1999) and *River of Fundament* (2014). The later chapters of this study touch on Barney’s aesthetic relationship to Mailer.

43. Mark Simpson, “The Wrong Stuff: The Private Space Race”, *marksimpson.com* 3 December 2007. Web. 25 November 2014. First published *Arena Hommes Plus*, Winter 2007.

44. See for instance the film *The Perverts Guide to Cinema* (2006), where Žižek discusses various examples of the deathlessness of drive in film.

45. *Cannibals and Christians*, 348-349.

46. See for example his discussion of the eighteenth century and technology in his debate with McLuhan.

47. Susan Sontag, “One Culture and the New Sensibility”, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 2001), 293-304.

48. Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures: Postmodern Philosophers’ Abuse*

*of Science* (London: Profile Books, 1998).

49. Waugh made this argument at a discussion on humanities and science in the University of Edinburgh's "What Was Postmodernism?" lecture series in 2002. Postmodern debates about the humanities and science have moved on in recent years with the rise of digital humanities and quantitative data mining of literary texts. Yet this internet-age post-McLuhan rapprochement is very different from the "one culture" utopianism of the sixties. Mailer was in any case always sceptical about positivistic claims. In an interview with Laura Adams, Mailer claimed that "There has to be something out there beyond logical positivism". *Pieces and Pontifications*, 84.

50. David Fuller and Patricia Waugh, *The Arts and Sciences of Criticism* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33.

51. Mark Simpson, "The Wrong Stuff: The Private Space Race".

52. Nevertheless, *Of A Fire On The Moon* itself became part of the kitsch historical fetishisation of the moon landings. On the 40th anniversary of the Apollo mission, the book, renamed *Moonfire*, was rereleased in a deluxe coffee-table edition by Taschen books. A Marc Newson-designed Lunar Rock Edition of the book came with its own unique piece of moon rock. A piece of the real comes with a hefty price. At the time of writing, the symbolically numbered edition no. 1969 was available on the Taschen website for the price of 480 000 euros. Accessed on November 25 2014, [www.taschen.com](http://www.taschen.com).



## Chapter 6. Mailer and sexuality: *The Prisoner of Sex* and beyond.

*The Prisoner of Sex* (1971) is a document of a legendary episode in intellectual history: Mailer's confrontation with the feminist movement. The book is a work of apologetics for the male writing of the nineteen sixties, and for masculinity in general. In particular, *The Prisoner of Sex* is a direct response to Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* (1970). The cornerstone of Millett's attack on patriarchal sexual politics was the inclusion of Mailer, along with Henry Miller, DH Lawrence and, in a different way, Jean Genet, in a canon of male novelists whose representations of sexuality embodied masculine "power relationships".<sup>1</sup> Mailer, highly critical of Millett's close readings, acts as an advocate for these writers. Reading these polemics today, it is easy to see this as simply a local literary skirmish. But Millett's choice of authors was not accidental. What is at stake in these critical readings is not a conservative or academic idea of a male "great tradition". These were, rather, the male sexual radicals that were central to the modernist culture in which that generation of feminists had received their literary and political education. What is being tussled over in this encounter with feminism is the political and sexual legacy of modernism. By critiquing a male dominated literary culture, second wave feminists were also looking to literature that spoke directly to women's experience of the world.<sup>2</sup> Mailer was a particular target for feminist critics, partly because of an infamous passage about women writers in *Advertisements for Myself*:

I have a terrible confession to make—I have nothing to say about any of the talented women who write today. Out of what is no doubt a fault in me, I do not seem able to read them. Indeed I doubt if there will be a really exciting woman writer until the first whore becomes a call girl and tells her tale. At the risk of making a dozen devoted enemies for life, I can only say that the sniffs I get from the ink of the women are always fey, old-hat, Quaintsy Goysy, tiny, too dykily psychotic, crippled, creepish, fashionable, frigid, outer-Baroque, *maquillé* in mannequin's whimsy, or else bright and stillborn. Since I've never been able to read Virginia Woolf, and am sometimes willing to believe that it can conceivably be my fault, this verdict



may be taken fairly as the twisted tongue of a soured taste, at least by those readers who do not share with me the ground of departure—that a good novelist can do without everything but the remnant of his balls.<sup>3</sup>

Statements like this came back to haunt Mailer. But, as many feminists recognised at the time, Mailer's views on women and their sexuality, while often crass, were politically nuanced: whatever else he was, Mailer was not a *crude* sexual reactionary.<sup>4</sup> One of the inner dramas of *The Prisoner of Sex* is Mailer wrestling with his own left-conservatism: the book is an attempt to articulate his own increasingly conservative anxieties about sex and technology, while confronting the more radical implications of feminist thought. Mailer's own perception of himself as a revolutionary writer was at stake.

*The Prisoner of Sex* should also be read as an argument about the sixties. The significant sites of contestation between Mailer and Millett are on issues of historical periodisation. Mailer criticises Millett, for example, for scarcely touching on the nineteen twenties, “a decade conceivable as interesting in the emancipation of women as any other ten years since the decline of Rome”.<sup>5</sup> But because of the legal struggles over *Tropic of Cancer* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, Miller and Lawrence had become powerful symbols of the liberatory consciousness of the sixties, both in its artistic forms (for example, Susan Sontag's advocacy of the “pornographic imagination”<sup>6</sup>), and in general society. Mailer himself had been heavily involved in these struggles, both in his own work and in his support of banned works such as *Naked Lunch*. Seen from this historical perspective, there was a political double hinging to feminism. On the one hand, feminism was clearly *of* the sixties, the decade of artistic and sexual freedom, black and gay rights, and anti-war radicalism. By the time of *The Prisoner of Sex*, Mailer had come to see the more radical feminist writing as a continuation of this artistic openness. Writers such as Germaine Greer and Valerie Solanas were writing “about men and about themselves as Henry Miller had once written about women” (43) in their descriptions of the physical body, and in their sexual radicalism. On the other hand, feminism was also *against* the sixties in its reaction against/critique of the sexism of male authors and the male left. And for

Mailer this had a censorious and even totalitarian potential. His defenses of Miller and Lawrence can of course be read as self-interested. But they also ought to be understood as a defense of newly won rights of literary expression which had been won from the political right and which, in an apparent twist, were under a renewed attack from the left.

Despite this real antagonism, *The Prisoner of Sex* shares a number of historical concerns with feminist politics. The sixties' sexual revolution, both in its feminist and non-feminist forms, was a reaction against the myth of the family and domesticity – in other words, the fifties. “The White Negro” is a classic response to Cold War containment culture and its underlying domesticity.<sup>7</sup> The sexual politics of that essay are quite removed from feminism in major respects, but common to both was a preoccupation with the politics of the kitchen. The defining feminist critique of this period is Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Friedan's classic sociological work spoke to the enormous dissatisfaction that many middle class women felt with the idealised fifties advertising myth of the perfect mother and housewife. *The Prisoner of Sex* explicitly links the “feminine mystique” to the ideology of the American Century:

Since ideological faith depends upon staying inside the system (because there is no way to treat the chaos outside) it was a period when women were considered neurotic if they rebelled against housework. The men would earn their salary in the tranquillity of equable labor-management relations and the women would offer happy homes for the husband's return from the corporation day – there was a psychiatrist in every suburb. [...] And the American Army would take care of the world. (178-179)

The “feminine mystique” was the bulwark of the fifties domestic division of labour. One way that art and literature responded to this idealised image of the economic family unit was to present marriage as a zone of conflict between the sexes. And here Mailer's work is both relevant and problematic for feminism. *An American Dream*, a definitively difficult work from a feminist perspective, is also a prime text of sixties' marital trouble, along with Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1962) and John

Cassavetes' film *Faces* (1968). The theme of marital conflict is also central to Mailer's poetry collection *Deaths for the Ladies (and other disasters)* (1962). This work emerged from bouts of melancholic solitary drinking in the eighteen months after Mailer had stabbed his second wife Adele. The collection contains a fragment "Rainy Afternoon with the Wife", which is usually read as a fictionalised reference to the stabbing: "So long as you use a knife, there's some love left".<sup>8</sup> *Deaths for the Ladies* is a highly personal reflection on love, violence, and ambivalence. But the book is also a cinematic snapshot of early sixties' gender politics. Mailer's troubled, and frequently troubling, preoccupation with violence is clearly part of that story. But the collection also hints at another tone, a muted poeticised beauty in suburban domestic lives ravaged by miscommunication and a failure to find transcendence in sex and love. Some of the fragments are even open to a feminist reading:

My flesh must smell like an old tire  
 my sex is bitter and gone  
 my days are leafless and all asleep  
     said the housewife  
     going to the specialist  
 one knows what kind

but in the waiting room  
 she was racked by a plague  
 from the pots of the American  
     miasma – our magazines,  
     and so lady murmured  
     too quietly  
 ever for her mind to hear:

*Reader's Digest*, please save *your* soul  
 and leave mine free to contemplate  
 eternity which must be more  
     than I glimpse for myself now  
     an endless promenade  
 across a field of baked old beans  
     a cataract of dishwater  
     regurgitated by the memory  
 of champagne I never drank  
 and kings I never kissed.<sup>9</sup>

What is at issue here is the desensitising effects of a feminised mass culture, but in this case from a female perspective. The poem is a clear exploration of the unhappiness lying below the surface of the “feminine mystique”. For all its Beat typography, *Deaths for the Ladies* was thematically close to the confessional poetry of Plath, Lowell and Sexton.

The kitchen was also one of the primary motifs of Pop Art. In a suggestive reading of Warhol’s film *Kitchen* (1966), Mailer yet again hints at trauma lurking within the home:

It was horrible. But it had the horror of the twentieth century in it. The refrigerator is making too much noise. The beautiful heroine, Edie Sedgwick, has the sniffles. She keeps blowing her nose while the hero keeps trying to rustle a sandwich together out of wax paper [...] You almost can’t bear it, but... when in the future they want to know about the riots in our cities, this may be the movie that tells them.<sup>10</sup>

Warhol, on this reading, fills the domestic space with a humming, overbearing intensity. The refrigerator is a classic “Pop” emblem of commodity culture in the home, but what is interesting in *The Prisoner of Sex* is how Mailer links this domesticity to the “chaos outside”. Private space is thus implicated in public disorder. Warhol does capture something dysfunctional and slightly “off” in the kitchen and thus in American consumer society in general. The famous Pop work is in this way linked to the race riot



**Fig. 11.** Andy Warhol, still from *Kitchen* (1966)

silkscreens that are a core part of the death and disaster series. Yet the lack of affect in Warhol depoliticizes these images. A more overt politicisation of the kitchen is visible in artists such as Martha Rosler, in Vietnam era works such as “Red Stripe Kitchen”, part of her *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* series of 1967-1972. The infiltration of Rosler’s pristine white and red kitchen space by American soldiers indicts precisely the ideas of domesticity and security that were at the heart of the feminine mystique. Rosler’s works exploit the visual language of Pop to more explicitly political ends, and it is to this latent meaning in Warhol that Mailer responds.<sup>11</sup>

*The Prisoner of Sex* is in agreement with some strands of feminism in its political and economic analysis of the place of women in postwar society. Yet for Mailer the really radical questions of feminism had little to do with ideas of “economic treatment” (50). *The Prisoner of Sex* is centrally focused on the sexual politics of the body, and it is on this issue that Mailer is most contentious for feminists. A great deal of the book argues in defence of Mailer’s notorious hostility to birth control. What grounds this hostility are



**Fig. 12. Martha Rosler, *Red Stripe Kitchen* (1967-1972)**

familiar Mailerian concerns about technology and sense experience. Reproductive technologies, like all technology for Mailer, insulate us from our own bodies and from our mortality. Sexual technologies and medicines are particularly held under suspicion for Mailer since sexuality is *par excellence* the activity where the will to recognition manifests itself. In *The Prisoner of Sex*, sexual acts are meaningful in much the same way that metaphor and myth also are for Mailer, precisely because there is a direct encounter with the real, that there is a “confrontation between fucking and reality” (190). Sex in this view is a dialectical encounter with our deepest anxieties and fears about our being. This impulse to find meaning in sex distinguishes Mailer from an

atheistic and behaviourist account of human sexuality as proposed by, for example, Gore Vidal. *The Prisoner of Sex* argues in essence that the scientific and materialist discourse of sex reduces sex to a functionalised banality (which is why so much of the book takes aim at the technical language of planned parenthood and sexology). Mailer asks us to consider the potential consequences for human subjectivity, and for the relationship between the sexes, when technology impinges on the largest questions of birth and death.

Mailer's central anxiety in this book is about the technologisation of the womb. The womb, argues *The Prisoner of Sex*, is one of the last uncolonised spaces of nature, an "inner space of creation" (59) which grounds sexual difference. Reproductive technologies such as the pill sever the link between sex and reproduction, and thus radically alters sexuality itself in a way that is for him at least potentially dystopian. Mailer's sexual politics here show some surprising similarities to conservative theology. These concerns about technology and nature, though common in the discourse about sexuality of the period, are also echoed in *Humanae Vitae*, the Vatican's 1968 encyclical on the regulation of birth.<sup>12</sup> Yet on the other major issue of women's reproductive rights, abortion, Mailer's views are not quite so conservative as they are sometimes painted. While he urges that women should not "quit the womb" (233), he does endorse the idea that women should be able to freely choose to conceive or to abort their pregnancies. His reasons are neither pragmatic nor strictly feminist. He expands on the subject in *St. George and the Godfather* (1972):

Abortion is therefore an act of self-recognition (which is a step to sanity) even as the decision not to have an abortion is another kind of sanity, which states, "I am committed to the best moments I have known and take my truth from that." (Which is why the pill like all other technological concepts is an insulation against sanity, for it inhibits the possibility of those confrontations which might reveal a woman to herself.)

Abortion legislation would of course be equal to giving women a new right to control what went on within their bodies. The extension of that principle was wondrous! It might give patients the right to die in peace when doctors

were determined to extend, stupefy, and therefore shift their last meditations before death.<sup>13</sup>

While this is consistent with Mailer's politics of recognition, there are a number of obvious problems with this argument. Material or economic circumstances are secondary to a decidedly romantic understanding of "choice" as self-recognition. The argument is also premised on a now very dated sixties' notion that "good fucks make good babies" (191). This can just about be justified as an artistic variation on the idea of unconscious mate selection (hence Mailer's extended animistic meditation on the dance between spermatozoa and ovum in *The Prisoner of Sex*). Mailer's views here are an odd amalgam of the biological and the mystical. Yet even if we reject Mailer's arguments on materialist grounds, his politics are not in essence anti-choice or anti-rights in the classically liberal sense: his views are speculative rather than doctrinal. Primarily, Mailer is interested in how medical innovations such as the pill and the discovery of the cause of puerperal fever *shape* the contemporary attitude to life. What is lost with the medicalisation of sex, and what abortion rights and euthanasia potentially restore for Mailer, is a sense of awe before the body.

Mailer is partly concerned here with the theological question that CS Lewis called the problem of pain. Lewis argues that that the secular world picture is closely linked to the solution to this problem: "All of the great religions were first preached, and long practiced, in a world without chloroform".<sup>14</sup> Lewis poses this as a thought experiment about the roots of religious feeling and its relationship to pain and death (although for his purposes, it is perhaps double-sided). Mailer makes a similar thought experiment in *The Prisoner of Sex* about Semmelweis and his discovery that, simply through the washing of hands, deaths from puerperal fever in childbirth could be practically eliminated. Mailer's point is that once pregnancy is no longer dangerous, when a lover is no longer a potential executioner, then a certain aura around life is also diminished, that life itself becomes simply a problem of medical management. Instead of welcoming the advantages for women of being liberated from the cycle of nature and from disease (as Andrea Dworkin notes about Mailer's remarks, puerperal fever killed Mary

Wollstonecraft in childbirth<sup>15</sup>), Mailer speculates that these innovations potentially prefigure a technological abandonment of the human body. Taken purely as a thought experiment, this does have a certain value as a way of thinking about bodily experience. However, what supports this image of modernity is the traumatic image of the female body suffering in labour, a body that haunts so much of Mailer's writing. Mailer really does at times sound like he believes that a woman dying in childbirth "knows" more about herself than a woman lying in the comfort of a clean modern hospital. If Mailer is critical of the feminine mystique of post-war American society, his body politics effectively endorses an even more essential mystification of women at the level of the body.

The original feminist case against Mailer was that, amongst other things, this thinking seems to reduce women to their biology, even identifies women with nature itself.<sup>16</sup> As Joseph Tabbi has argued, however, Mailer's politics of the body are also open to a postmodern feminist critique of the authentic natural body, a body unmediated by technology and culture.<sup>17</sup> Postmodern feminists such as Donna Haraway<sup>18</sup> argue that this body is essentially a nostalgic fantasy: women should embrace the prosthetic "cyborg" reality of the body, a multiple site of pleasures and connections that can be deconstructed and reconstructed in politically liberating ways. Mailer, whose conception of the body is essentially humanist, sees this cyborg body as a nightmare. *The Prisoner of Sex* is perhaps best read as a speculative argument about a transition to what Francis Fukuyama calls "our posthuman future".<sup>19</sup> Mailer's humanism not only underwrites his literary defense of Miller and Lawrence, but also the book's dystopian, sci-fi anxieties about extra-uterine wombs and genetic engineering. Sexuality deprived both of difference and of authentically human confrontations becomes in *The Prisoner of Sex* simply a matter of power and narcissistic manipulation of a particularly technocratic kind.

This humanism is tied in the book to predictions about the end of sex as a humanistic category. A similar idea has more recently been suggested by Slavoj Žižek



in an essay entitled “No Sex Please, We’re Post-Human!”. Žižek proposes that the virtualisation of the human body through biogenetics and cybernetics threatens to abolish the category of sexuality itself: “What if sexual difference is not simply a biological fact, but the Real of an antagonism that defines humanity, so that once sexual difference is abolished, a human being effectively becomes indistinguishable from a machine”?<sup>20</sup> For Žižek, what constitutes the human is the traumatic external encounter with the Other that initiates the subject into the symbolic universe. What is potentially lost in posthumanism, at the end of sexual difference, is this traumatic aspect of human subjectivity and sexuality. For Žižek, as I read him, the posthuman dream of a radically virtual and transcendent human subject is paradoxically based on an essentially monistic and materialist idea of the machine.<sup>21</sup> Žižek’s essay draws on an example from fiction, Michel Houellebecq’s *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998), a fiction which is both a meditation on posthumanism and an attack on the sexually liberated utopianism of the *soixante-huitards*. And it is in part this atomised dystopianism which is the subject of *The Prisoner of Sex*. Mailer’s humanism is couched in terms of a meaningful dialectics of sex (to co-opt Shulamith Firestone’s feminist phrase), an essential although fragile interplay of recognitions between the sexes. And for Mailer, it is sexual technology that threatens that romantic subjectivity.

The key moment of sex-as-intersubjectivity in Mailer’s fiction is the love-making between Cherry and Rojack in *An American Dream*. Tabbi notes the importance of contraception in this scene: “the diaphragm’s removal is necessary for both lovers to lose themselves in the act, to forget their social roles, and dissolve their independent wills”.<sup>22</sup> The diaphragm here is a barrier to the mutual and passionate recognition that Mailer seems to desire in sex, beyond casual lust and beyond power. The problem with this reading is, as we saw in chapter 4, that it is Rojack whose romantic subjectivity is largely at stake. Cherry is in many ways simply a cipher for Rojack’s salvaged masculinity. Feminist criticism went a long way in critiquing this kind of masculine romanticism. It also by that very act historicised it as a phenomenon of the sixties’ culture. But by

the time of the post-Aids and post-feminist era, that idea of sexual transcendence and mutual recognition was beginning to look romantic on other grounds. *An American Dream* is in many ways a direct fictional precursor to Bret Easton Ellis' equally notorious *American Psycho*, a novel which in sexual politics terms was to the eighties and nineties what Mailer's novel was for the sixties. The shift in sexual politics in *American Psycho* is partly registered through a shift in attitude towards contraception:

"Do you think you're turning me on by having *unsafe sex*?" she screams back.

"Oh Christ, this really isn't worth it," I mutter, pulling the condom down so there is half an inch to spare - a little less, actually. "And see, Courtney, it's there for what? Huh? Tell us?." I slap her again, this time lightly. "Why is it pulled down half an inch? So it can catch the *force of the ejaculate*!"

"Well, it's *not* a turn-on *for me*." She's hysterical, racked with tears, choking. "I have a promotion coming to me. I'm going to Barbados in August and I don't want a case of Kaposi's sarcoma to fuck it up!" She chokes, coughing. "Oh god I want to wear a bikini," she wails. "A Norma Kamali I just bought at Bergdorf's".

I grab her head and force her to look at the placement of the condom. "See? Happy? You dumb bitch? Are you happy, you dumb bitch?"

Without looking at my dick she sobs, "Oh god just get it over with," and falls back down on the bed.

Roughly I push my cock back into her and bring myself to an orgasm so weak as to be almost nonexistent and my groan of a massive but somewhat expected disappointment is mistaken by Courtney for pleasure and momentarily spurs her on as she lies sobbing beneath me on the bed, sniffing, to reach down and touch herself but I start getting soft almost instantly - actually *during* the moment I came - but if I don't withdraw from her while still erect she'll freak out so I hold on to the base of the condom as I literally *wilt* out of her. After lying there for what must be twenty minutes with Courtney whimpering about Luis and antique cutting boards and the sterling silver cheese grater and muffin tin she left at Harry's, she then tries to give me head. "I want to fuck you again," I tell her, "but I don't want to wear a condom because I don't feel anything," and she says calmly, taking her mouth off my limp shrunken dick, glaring at me, "If you don't use one you're not going to feel anything anyway."<sup>23</sup>

Here, the Wall Street anxiety about contraception has little to do with conception as

such (which in any case would imply “investing” in the future), but to do with the prevention of disease. The mutually trusting love-making that is romantically valorised in *An American Dream* proves untenable in the later novel, partly because of the spectre of AIDS, but equally as much because, in this fictional version of the eighties, the emergence of AIDS itself has come to symbolise an atomised field of gender and class power relationships. Patrick Bateman and his female partner’s love-making has little to do with tenderness, and everything to do with corporate recreation and the reinforcement of mutual bonds of power and interest. The point of this scene, of course, is Patrick Bateman’s powerlessness, his masculine insufficiency. Unable to find satisfactory relationships with women of his own class, Bateman finds recourse in fantasies, or actualisations, of violence (crucially, it is ambiguous which). Bateman’s narcissistic violence is of course a satirical reflection *in extremis* of the greed of the eighties, and has an ambiguous relationship to feminism. But the novel also resonates with Mailer’s understanding of violence as an effect of the mediation of sense experience, as a hunger for real feeling.

*The Prisoner of Sex* views sexuality as closely bound up with questions of power and violence. The central metaphor of Mailer’s book is that of sexuality as prison-house. But it is in the literal institution of the prison that Mailer sees the mechanisms of gender and power operating most purely. Mailer closely links the prison with institutionalised male homosexuality and coded systems of masculine power. For Mailer, sex and gender are categories of power and powerlessness. The hierarchies of male dominance that feature in Mailer and Jean Genet can always be translated into active and passive sexual roles:

It could be said that just as civil society is founded on money, so prison population is founded on the social holdings of prick-on-ass [...]

Heterosexual sex with contraception is become by this logic a form of sexual currency closer to the homosexual than the heterosexual, a clearinghouse for power, a market for psychic power in which the stronger will use the weaker, and the female

in the act, whether possessed of a vagina or a phallus, will look to ingest the masculine qualities of the dominator (165, 173)

Mailer is not really talking here about gay male identity or same-sex relationships as we now understand them (post-Stonewall political identity was just emerging at the time of *The Prisoner of Sex*<sup>24</sup>). He is talking rather about the artificial hierarchies of institutional life, which he sees as reflective of the power dynamics of masculine identity as a whole. Mailer cites contemporary affidavits relating to a revolt and its brutal suppression in a New York jail (presumably the 1971 Attica riots). According to the affidavits, a line of naked convicts were herded together by the prison officers and told to line-up “prick-on-ass”: any convict whose penis was erect would avoid a beating. Mailer’s reading of these affidavits is that the prison officers were acting to disrupt the “social order” of prison life, where “the pecking order is equal to the fucking order” (165). In disrupting the “chain of buggery”, Mailer remarks that the “effect of the order to line up against each other indiscriminately was to make them all equally women since it emphasised that the only real phallus in the place belonged to the law” (166). What Mailer contends here is that the disruption of one system of codings (that of the “fucking order” of the prison population) is merely a re-assertion of a higher authority (that of the prison officers). Mailer is here echoing the Lacanian notion of phallus, not as penis, but as the primal signifier, the mark of symbolic authority. It is the phallus, according to Lacan, that introduces lack into the symbolic order. In this sense of *symbolic* castration, Mailer has a case when he writes that the prison populace were “all equally women” in the eyes of the Law.

Power structures are inherently masculine for Mailer (this much he shares with some strands of feminist critique). But the converse is also true in his work: relationships between men are through and through determined by questions of power. Kate Millett’s insight that Mailer’s “most formative adult experience took place in the men’s-house culture of the army”<sup>25</sup> is relevant here. To be masculine in such a culture is not simply a matter of dominance, but about jockeying for position within

the “pecking order”. Masculine identity for Mailer is thus fundamentally shadowed by “homosexuality”, which is sometimes for him simply another way of saying the homoerotic component that underpins male competitiveness. Male identity is so precarious for Mailer precisely because of the relationship he sees between the “pecking order” and the “fucking order”. Central to this is Mailer’s preoccupation with anality, his perception of masculinity as being constituted along a “chain of buggery”. For Mailer the anus is a particularly over-determined site of the body, a repository for many anxieties and many meanings about power and waste. It is certainly true that plenty of critics have raised eyebrows at this fascination with buggery<sup>26</sup>, and Mailer’s descriptions of anal sex are famously baroque. But, as the writer Mark Simpson argues, anal sex is more generally a matter of anxiety in contemporary Western culture:

in a “sex-positive” world, anal sex is the last naughty, filthy thing there is [...] the easiest way to literally dramatise the “crisis of masculinity” and the ambivalence of relations between men. The anus is the “weak spot” in the masculine body – and God saw fit to add temptation to vulnerability by giving all men a prostate gland [...]  
Male homosexuality in general and male anal sex in particular might be the epitome of hot, bestial lust – mostly to those who’ve never tried it – but in a postpill, postmarital, postmonogamy society we’re all, male and female, gay and straight, tangoing in Sodom. Anal sex is such a “hot” issue, not just because it represents anxious identities, but also because it symbolizes the non-reproductive, non-romantic use of sex we’re all making.<sup>27</sup>

The fear of penetration, of being “punked”, is endemic to men in Mailer’s fiction. *An American Dream* is perhaps the most notable example of this anxiety<sup>28</sup>, but this theme runs throughout his work from as early as *The Naked and the Dead*. The anus is indeed the “weak spot” in masculinity for Mailer, because to be sodomised is to give up power, to essentially take on the female role in the “pecking order” (conversely, to sodomise is in this worldview to assert mastery by denying or traducing female productive power). As the archetypal form of “non-reproductive sex” in our culture, anal sex represents for

Mailer both the “vulnerabilities” and “temptations” of a masculinity that is in constant revolt against the feminine. It is no historical accident that he focuses so much on this particular anxiety in his fiction. Its obsessive treatment in his work does hint at how Mailer was acutely aware of, and sensitive to, the “weak spots” not only of masculinity, but that of his society. His literary explorations of anal sex are frequently presented as efforts to confront or extirpate this obsession and its meanings through writing.<sup>29</sup> The Mailer paradox is that he is both an acute witness of and almost a perfect case study in “anxious identity”.

*The Prisoner of Sex* primarily engages with homosexuality through the works of Jean Genet. In their writing about masculinity, the writers of *The Naked and the Dead* and *Our Lady of the Flowers* have a lot in common, not least an interest in macho hierarchies. For the postwar avant-garde, Genet was the paradigm case of the homosexual as outlaw. For heterosexual male intellectuals like Mailer, Genet provided a canvas onto which both their ideas and anxieties could be projected. In an earlier review of the play *The Blacks*, Mailer had praised Genet as a rebel against heterosexual romance and courtship (in essence, as a variation on the white negro). There is, however, a consistent ambivalence in Mailer’s feelings about Genet, which reflects a wider ambivalence and occasional hostility in his exploration of homosexuality as a literary subject.<sup>30</sup> Mailer’s views here are open to two readings, the first conservative, the second existential:

1) First, the conservative reading. In Mailer’s review of *The Blacks*, he implicitly contrasts “narcissistic” homosexuality with reciprocal adult heterosexuality. This distinction echoes the conventional view of homosexuality that began with Freud, who in his earlier writings on sexuality directly linked homosexuality to a narcissistic stage of development.<sup>31</sup> Mailer’s sexual politics at first would seem to reverse the Freudian polarity. “The White Negro” was a manifesto of revolt against the middle class “respectable love life”, and Genet’s outlaw homosexuality fits in well with some of the radical precepts of that essay. As much as straight hipsters, gay artists like Genet and William Burroughs were often the political and creative driving forces of avant-

garde culture in this period (one of the things Mailer found most interesting about *Naked Lunch* was precisely its taboo homosexual imagery<sup>32</sup>). But there was always an undercurrent of rabbinic moralism to Mailer's sexual politics, which are often surprisingly proscriptive about any form of non-procreative sex, from masturbation, to sex with contraception, to homosexual sex. The heterosexual respectability of white Protestant culture might have seemed a cultural and sexual dead-end, but Mailer nevertheless invests heterosexuality with a remarkable romantic potency – it is precisely for him the ethical opposite of what he considers to be autoerotic and narcissistic forms of sexuality. Mailer's objection here is not developmental as with Freud; rather, it is about preserving his precious dialectical sense of sex and the body. In Mailer's terms, sex is anti-dialectical when there is no nourishing meeting of opposites, no potential for communicative synthesis, let alone any potential for the creation of life.<sup>33</sup> While Genet's work had the communicativity of great art, this was for Mailer the art of masturbatory narcissism. This is homosexuality as radically against nature and against biology, “alienated from the biological chain”.<sup>34</sup>

2) While *The Prisoner of Sex* does not substantially deviate from the position set out in *The Blacks* review, it is more nuanced in its tone and more open to a radical interpretation of Genet's gender politics. One reason why Genet was also so appealing to Sartre is that his work presents an anti-essentialist account of gender identity. Genet is the laureate of the denaturalisation of gender, of gender's radical separation from biological sex. His work thus exposes a certain artificiality of gender roles, which for Genet are a theatrical expressions of power. *The Prisoner of Sex* is at its most interesting when exploring this existential aspect of sexual identity. The important point to grasp about Mailer's views here is that he believes that masculinity and femininity aren't mere products of conditioning, that they derive from an “instinct” or an “impulse” of nature. But this is not to say that we are simple products of biological destiny; nor can we say that gender or sexuality are matters of any kind of *essential* identity. Mailer even suggests at one point that science itself suggests that our categories of thinking

about sex and gender are wrong and that “such qualities as masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual, did not exist in any way we understood them” (129). And regardless of science, sexual identity is for Mailer in any case not fixed: it is a matter of self-becoming and self-fashioning, both achievement and creative performance. And it is also something that is precariously fought for. Genet’s work for Mailer was not only radically insightful about masculine performance, but also a powerful model for his own exploration of the prison-house of masculinity and “the castles, drawbridges, penitentiaries, and moats at the back of every heterosexual urge” (162). Male identity is for Mailer all about conflict and locked and clashing minority impulses. And in this sense it is not “free”.<sup>35</sup>

Whatever the descriptive power of this account of sexual power relationships, Mailer’s expression of these ideas is not especially congenial to current thinking about sex and sexuality. It is worth outlining some reasons why over and beyond the familiar feminist arguments. One obvious historical reason is that this kind of dialectical existentialism would quickly be challenged by the rise of post-structuralist accounts of gender identity in the seventies and eighties. *The Prisoner of Sex* shares Foucault’s concerns with power, as well as an interest in the “prison”, but lacks the historicism of *The History of Sexuality*. A second reason is simply the increasing social acceptance and visibility of homosexuality in Western culture. The idea that same sex relationships might be loving and reciprocal doesn’t really feature in Mailer’s thinking, given the specific terms in which he thinks about difference. Yet it also seems odd to think of Mailer as simply a reactionary on the subject. Mailer belonged to a post-Kinseyan literary generation who believed that sexual behaviour in its broadest sense was a legitimate subject, even a frontier, for fiction. Like Gore Vidal, Mailer saw how a fear of homosexuality was central to American masculinity, and that this related to questions of power, including political power. But there is nothing in Mailer like Vidal’s matter-of-fact behaviourism. Vidal famously said that “There is no such thing as a homosexual or a heterosexual person. There are only homo – or heterosexual acts. Most people are



a mixture of impulses if not practices”.<sup>36</sup> That idea was rather different (more modern, if you like) than Mailer’s insistence that sexuality was inherently meaningful. Whatever the power of his insight into male motivations, which was often considerable, Mailer’s radical-conservative reading of homosexuality has dated rather badly in some respects. Yet there is one area in which Mailer’s understanding of masculinity and homosexuality does have some enduring interest: the subject of male self-presentation.

Mark Simpson’s work on contemporary masculinity, which I have already cited and drawn on here, is I think an important current attempt to grapple with questions of male self-presentation. Simpson’s writing, influenced by Vidal and Freud<sup>37</sup>, draws on gay identity as a way of thinking about 21st century masculinity. Simpson’s argument is that gay culture provided one of the templates for contemporary maleness. The key notion he mobilises to understand this is narcissism, a notion that has a complicated but vital relationship to homosexuality in art and culture.<sup>38</sup> Simpson coined the term *metrosexual* to describe a new narcissist who, gay or straight, increasingly defines himself by self-cultivation through grooming, expensive clothing, and the consumption of vanity goods and services. Although Simpson had coined this term as early as 1994, the mainstream adoption of the word can be traced to a 2002 article in *Salon*. In this article, Simpson makes a casual but telling reference to Mailer, citing his claim that gay men are “narcissists who occasionally bump into each other”.<sup>39</sup> The idea here of sexuality as narcissistic misrecognition clearly finds parallels in the ideas explored in *The Prisoner of Sex*. And Simpson may have been on to something in citing Mailer on male narcissism in this essay. In “The White Negro”, Mailer had predicted just this kind of cultural hybridity, and while he drew on the more macho source of black culture<sup>40</sup>, the influence of gay style on mainstream culture has had a similar effect (Adam Curtis calls today’s hipsters “gay white negroes”<sup>41</sup>). While Mailer felt that the white negro would change American society (and he was right up to a point), hipster narcissism would turn out to be tuned more to the rhythms of consumer capitalism than those of avant-garde rebellion. Simpson views metrosexuality largely as an adaptation of masculinity to post-

industrial society, rather than a rebellion against it. Moreover, metrosexuality is rather less conflicted, if only to a degree, than the style of masculinity associated with Mailer and his literary peers.

Mailer's own masculinity seems in this respect very much of its time and (post-Hemingway) generation. Yet it is worth recalling that his sexual persona was forged primarily in the sixties, a key decade in terms of the mediation of male image (witness *Mad Men*'s Don Draper's popularity as a fictional archetype). He is largely associated in the cultural imagination with the *Esquire* masculinity of the Kennedy era, and, largely because of feminism, its sexism.<sup>42</sup> Mailer's popular image as arch-narcissist reinforces this view, as does his identity as pugilist and literary lion. These were certainly masks Mailer wore and exploited, but



**Fig. 13. Diane Arbus's portrait of Mailer (1963)**

his masculinity was always more complicated. Take, for example, Diane Arbus' famous photographic portrait of Mailer. What is arresting about this image is the tension between the sitter's attempt to *pose* himself as a persona, and the photographer's effort to *expose* that self-image. The first thing to notice about the picture is its frontality, it's enactment of "facing". With the right hand poised as if holding a pen, or perhaps a dart, Mailer's gaze fixes the viewer directly. There is also the defiant cockiness of the draped left leg, which exposes his slightly ruffled crotch. This is the intellectual as bad-boy, as civilized ape. Arbus also brings out a certain defensiveness, if not actual vulnerability, in Mailer's masculinity. The over-sized velvet chair also emphasises his relatively short size (he was 5'7"). A comic sense of disproportion in his own physicality informed the mock-heroic persona of works like *The Armies of the Night*. Even so, Mailer himself may have been taken aback by this image. Mailer once said that "Giving a camera to Diane Arbus is like giving a hand grenade to a baby", and he may have had

this portrait partly in mind.<sup>43</sup>

Arbus' photograph is an image not just of narcissistic "front", but of masculinity as a form of phallic display. Mailer is an infamously phallocentric writer (in *The Prisoner of Sex*, this leads to absurdities such as comparing the relative cubic capacities of the penis and the clitoris). Partly, this is about the authority of the male artist. But another way of thinking about the phallus is it to think of it as a kind of mask. What is most suggestive in Lacan is the notion that the phallus is artificial: in essence, a prosthesis.<sup>44</sup> Slavoj Žižek explains it this way: the phallus is not something you have, it's something you wear.<sup>45</sup> Mailer frequently refers to masculinity as a burden that is worn, rather than simply given.<sup>46</sup> He often exploits this insight for its comic potential. In the documentary *Town Bloody Hall* (1979), Mailer confronts his feminist critics with just such an appeal to artifice: "I'm perfectly willing, if you wish me to act the clown, I will take out my modest little Jewish dick and put it on the table, you can all spit on it and laugh at it. Then I'll walk away and you'll find it was just a dildo I had up there. I hadn't shown you the real one". Mailer is indeed playing the clown here, although this also acts as a reminder that his concern is always in one way or another about his Jewish masculinity (he once wrote that the one identity he found "insupportable" was that of "the nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn"<sup>48</sup>). Mailer is fully aware that masculinity is a "put-on", and this sense of acting out informs his own public performances. Yet what makes Mailer such a complicated figure is his sincere identification with masculinity. Sometimes this identification is quite literally mimetic: "the nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn" would frequently slip into a tough Irish or Southern accent when speaking in public. This is masculinity as ventriloquism. Yet while this might give us an insight into Mailer's own relationship to machismo, it does in itself negate what Mailer has to say about masculinity. Whatever the potential comedy of male performance, in a basic sense Mailer sees the "passion to be male" (90) as both very serious and relentless. As Mailer sees it, the achievement of masculinity is never "automatic" (168). It can thus be honorific, as well as toxic, but what it is never for Mailer is settled. As he writes in

*Advertisements for Myself*, “being a man is the continuing battle of one’s life”.<sup>48</sup>

Kate Millett offers an important insight into the Mailer paradox by describing him as a figure of “divided conscience”, both analyst and prisoner of the “virility cult”.<sup>49</sup> According to Millett, Mailer offers us “the spectacle of his dilemma, the plight of a man whose powerful intellectual comprehension of what is most dangerous in the masculine sensibility is exceeded only by his attachment to the malaise”.<sup>50</sup> Millett only pursues one side of this duality in *Sexual Politics*, a weakness that Mailer attacks in *The Prisoner of Sex*. Feminist criticism in general has too readily identified Mailer with his fictional characters, as if Stephen Rojack or Sergeant Croft were simple expressions of the author’s beliefs and attitudes. But there is no doubt that Mailer’s fictional identifications are morally tangled. The dilemma for readers of Mailer is that it’s hard to identify precisely where critique ends and identification begins. Yet even here identification is not in itself endorsement. When Mailer expresses a “secret admiration” for Sergeant Croft, he is not making a full identification with a fascist thug as much as he is exploring an illicit aspect of violent male identity. This is a legitimate function of fiction. Readers can decide for themselves the degree to which they are willing to follow Mailer in exploring a line of identification with a Gary Gilmore or a Stephen Rojack. But in his own terms, it is part of the ethics and freedom of the novel that readers can imaginatively inhabit unpalatable aspects of selfhood. One of Mailer’s major contributions to the novel is precisely this forensic dissection of male violence. And yet no sensitive reading of his work can be blind to Mailer’s “attachment to the malaise”, not least because of the very real human consequences of this attachment in his own life. Again, the feminist case against Mailer may not be sufficient, but it is a necessary one.

*The Prisoner of Sex* is perceptive about the punishing demands of male identity, and how this identity is often a prison-house. The vicious circle of masculinity for Mailer is that the only solution to it is more masculinity. But Mailer also found in masculinity a medium for a kind of creative metamorphosis, an interest that the artist Matthew Barney has drawn on in his adaptations of Mailer’s work. Barney’s *Cremaster Cycle* (the

cremaster muscle is involved in spermatogenesis) picks up on Mailer's ideas on sex and masculinity and visually elaborates them to explore ideas about posthuman sexual identity. Mailer's imagination of the spermatazoon's animistic journey to the egg in *The Prisoner of Sex* is replayed throughout Barney's film cycle in numerous variations, but it is only in *Cremaster 2* (1999) that this debt is explicit. The film is an avant-garde reworking of *The Executioner's Song*, and explores the transmogrifications of male identity and its intersection with technology. Mailer plays Harry Houdini in the film as one of the soul-iterations of Gilmore.<sup>51</sup> In *Cremaster 2*, Mailer-as-Houdini considers the question of the role of the male in the hive:

I can assure you that each time I challenged myself to escape,  
A real transformation does take place.  
Within Metamorphosis,  
Houdini becomes part of the cage that contains him  
He enters the lock  
That seals his bonds  
He digests the lock  
He becomes part of it  
Tonight the metamorphosis was a little slower  
But no less effective.

Barney's work suggests a way in which Mailer's thinking about sex, technology and the soul might be imaginatively liberated from the narrow confines of the sixties' culture wars. Nevertheless, there is a recognition in *The Prisoner of Sex* that his own ideas may have come to be constricting. He writes:

No thought was so painful as the idea that sex had meaning: for  
give meaning to sex and one was the prisoner of sex – the more  
meaning one gave it, the more it assumed, until every failure  
and misery, every evil of your life, spoke their lines in its light.  
(213)

The book immediately sets off from here on one of its many dialectical flights of the imagination. But the key point being made is that once a writer is imaginatively committed to meanings, these themselves can become categories of constriction as much as freedom. The meanings that Mailer explores in *The Prisoner of Sex* exhibit both

these qualities. The book has a freedom of speculation which makes it both illuminating about the question of feminism and points beyond it to think about the future of the “human”. But the contemporary reader also has to deal with Mailer tying himself in dialectical knots to defend what amounts to, say, a rather standard notion of the castration complex or penis envy, despite his specific post-Freudian criticisms of these ideas. For this reason Mailer’s sexual politics cannot exactly be reclaimed. But if he was a prisoner of sex who never did quite escape, like Houdini he was able to make art out of these chains.



**Fig. 14. Harry Houdini. Matthew Barney claimed that “When Mailer was young he looked an awful lot like Houdini”.**

1. Millett 24.

2. An example of this attitude comes from Andrea Dworkin: “I wish I had grown up reading Jean Rhys. I did grow up reading DH Lawrence and Jean Genet and Henry Miller”. *Letters from a War Zone: Writings, 1976-1987* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1988), 93.

3. *Advertisements for Myself*, 387.
4. Kate Millett at least in part recognises Mailer's "powerful intellectual comprehension" of masculinity (314). And Jean Radford also recognised a more critical aspect to the earlier work: "In his first novel *The Naked and the Dead*, the competitive virility cult, in which the American male is held prisoner, is subject to searching and detailed criticism; it is one of the key elements of the author's indictment of American values". *Norman Mailer: A Critical Study* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 124.
5. *The Prisoner of Sex*, 101. Citations hereafter bracketed in the text.
6. Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Picador USA, 2002), 35-73.
7. See Alan Nadel, *Containment Culture: American Narrative, Postmodernism, and the Atomic Age* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).
8. The poem fragments that would become *Deaths for the Ladies* were written on scraps of paper during a period of heavy drinking when Mailer was recovering from the stabbing and its aftermath. Yet as he recalls in a preface to the collection, Mailer took considerable care with the selection, arrangement, and typography of the final collection. As with *An American Dream*, there is a sense here of giving symbolic form to the traumatic event by means of aesthetic ordering. See *The Essential Mailer*, 452-457.
9. All quotes from *Deaths for the Ladies, and Other Disasters* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1962). No pagination in the original.
10. *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, 164, 141.
11. See also Rosler's 1975 short film "The Semiotics of the Kitchen" for a more overtly feminist exploration of this theme.
12. Key concerns of *Humanae Vitae* were overpopulation and feminism, but its main concern was technology. "But the most remarkable development of all is to be seen in man's stupendous progress in the domination and rational organization of the forces of nature to the point that he is endeavoring to extend this control over every aspect of his own life—over his body, over his mind and emotions, over his social life, and even over the laws that regulate the transmission of life." See Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, Vatican July 25 1968. Web. 6 July 2015. For more on Mailer's "Catholic" attitude to birth control, see "Impolite Interview" with Paul Krassner, *The Presidential Papers*, 142.
13. *The Time of Our Time* (London: Abacus, 1998), 808.
14. CS Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London: Collins, 2012), 5.
15. Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1981), 54-55.
16. "This kind of biological determinism, which by implication completely excludes women from the political and intellectual advantages gained in the twentieth century, is obviously anachronistic. It is consistent with an earlier image of women in terms of their 'natural' functions, their role in an organic social system where the woman had



little or no control of biological factors”. Radford 145-146.

17. Tabbi 58-60.

18. See *Simians, Cyborgs and Women* (London: Free Association, 1991), 149-181. Haraway calls her Cyborg Manifesto an “ironic political myth” (149).

19. See Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (London: Profile, 2002).

20. Slavoj Žižek, “No Sex, Please, We’re Post-Human!”, *lacan.com* 8 November 2001. Web. 6 July 2015.

21. The notion of posthuman body as machine has recently been affirmed by the scientist Aarathi Prasad in the promotion of her book *Like A Virgin: How Science is Redesigning the Rules of Sex*: “I mean, we are machines, after all. We have all these ethical and social over-layers, but the body is a machine.” “Why Sex Could Be History”, interview with Kira Cochrane, *The Guardian* 17 August 2012. Web. 6 July 2015.

22. Tabbi 58.

23. Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (London: Picador, 1991), 104-105.

24. Gay politics features briefly in *Town Bloody Hall*, where an activist challenges Mailer on his views about gay men. Here post-Kinseyan and post-Freudian existentialism meets identity politics.

25. Millett 315.

26. Christopher Hitchens, for instance, felt that Mailer “manifested an obsession with sodomy that was something a bit more (and perhaps even a bit less) than macho”. “Norman Mailer: Remembering the pint-size Jewish fireplug”.

27. Mark Simpson, *Sex Terror: Erotic Misadventures in Pop Culture*. Kindle file, 2013.

28. In its original serialised form *An American Dream* was an even more “anxious” text. As Herschel Parker notes, in editing the work for book publication for the Dial Press, Mailer removed a number of references to homosexuality, including a prison flashback. See *Flawed Texts and Verbal Icons: Literary Authority in American Fiction* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1984), 187-188. While the revised edition does contain an element of homosexual panic, it’s interesting to note that Mailer felt compelled to minimise or disavow this aspect in the final text.

29. In a late interview, Mailer said that an anal rape in *Ancient Evenings* was “the most painful, difficult thing I ever wrote”. See “The Karma of Words”, interview with John Whalen-Bridge, *Journal of Modern Literature* 30 (2006): 4-5.

30. In a 1960 letter to Jean Malaquais, Mailer described a performance of Genet’s *The Balcony* in these terms: “the atmosphere was much too perfumed and faggy. I think some of this is Genet’s fault; for all his brilliance he still gives me a pain in the ass”. Letter dated April 29 1960. Printed in “In the Ring”, *New Yorker* October 6 2008. Web.



20 April 2013. This letter jokingly but revealingly brings to the surface the anxieties about anal sex that were only implicit in the review of *The Blacks*.

31. Freud's first discussion of narcissism comes in his biography of Leonardo and is directly linked to homosexuality. See Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time* (London and Basingstoke: Papermac, 1995), 272. Leo Bersani has persuasively argued that Freud's early writings on sexuality do propose a "teleological" model of sexual development, but can also be read against the grain in interesting ways that are illuminating for a broader discussion of sexuality and "perversion" in art. *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 31-33.

32. *Pieces and Pontifications*, 108. From *Pontifications*.

33. Mailer's romantic subjectivity here resembles William Blake, who does make an appearance in *The Prisoner of Sex*. As Camille Paglia writes, "homosexuality is negative and narcissistic for Blake because it evades the fruitful opposition of sexual contraries". *Sexual Personae*, 289.

34. *The Presidential Papers*, 228.

35. For the gender theorist Judith Butler, if gender performance is not free it is because gender is a "performative act", a series of iterated and culturally imposed gestures. Following Foucault's postmodern account of the subject, Butler rejects the idea of a subject that "expresses" a gender. While there are superficial similarities between Mailer's views in *The Prisoner of Sex* and post-structuralist gender theory, there are two fundamental differences: (1) Mailer's emphasis on nature and biology and (2) Mailer's use of metaphors of theatre and role-playing to think about sexual identity. Judith Butler quite specifically rejects existentialism, and the metaphors of the mask and of theatre in her writing about sexual identity. In other words, performance is not the same as performativity. See Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993).

36. *United States: Essays : 1952-1992* (1993; London: Abacus, 2008), 442.

37. Simpson's early work in particular was part of queer theory's "return to Freud" in the nineties, although his work rapidly moved away from the theoretical language of "theory", while retaining the Freudianism. See Mark Simpson, *Male Impersonators: Men Performing Masculinity* (London: Cassell, 1994).

38. See Lomas, *Narcissus Reflected*, 21.

39. Mark Simpson, "Meet the Metrosexual", *Salon* 22 July 2002. Web. 6 July 2015.

40. Race is relatively unremarked on in Simpson's account of metrosexuality. David Beckham's metrosexuality clearly borrowed from gay culture, but it was as at least as much a product of an encounter with early twenty-first century black culture. In 2003, Channel 4 broadcast a programme entitled "Black Like Beckham" exploring this issue. See also Peter Conrad, who in the same year linked Beckham to Mailer's "white negro". See "Blend It Like Beckham", *Guardian* 25 May 2003. Web. 26 April 2013.

41. Adam Curtis, "White Negro for Mayor", *bbc.co.uk* 1 May 2012. Web. 28 December 2015.
42. In Todd Haynes' Bob Dylan movie *I'm Not There* (2007), a brief appearance by Mailer is an obvious cinematic shorthand for "the sexist sixties".
43. Mailer was, however, most obviously thinking of Arbus' 1962 photograph "Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park". See Patricia Bosworth, *Diane Arbus: A Biography* (New York, London: W.W. Norton, 1985), 227. Bosworth also reports a discussion between Arbus and Walker Evans: "Diane told Evans she'd photographed Mailer shadow-boxing with his own reflection in a mirror, and Evans loved that." (212).
44. In "Signification of the Phallus", Lacan writes that "The fact that femininity finds its refuge in the mask [...] has the curious consequence of making virile display in the human being itself see feminine". *Écrits*, 322.
45. See the discussion of *Blue Velvet* in *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006).
46. See "Machismo isn't that easy to wear", interview with Oliver Burkeman, *Guardian* 5 February 2002. Web. 6 July 2015.
47. *Armies of the Night*, 153.
48. *Advertisements for Myself*, 150.
49. Millett 314. This paradoxical doubleness has been a consistent theme of Mailer criticism. More recently, Maggie McKinley has argued that "While Mailer's representation of masculinity is controversial in that its reliance on various modes of violence—from interpersonal to misogynistic to political—does threaten to reify many of the oppressive social structures that Mailer and his protagonists find so restrictive, his body of work nevertheless offers significant insight into prevalent issues of conflicted gendered identity in American culture." See "Existentialism, Violent Liberation, and Racialized Masculinities: — Norman Mailer", The Norman Mailer Society on *Medium* 26 June 2015. Web. 23 January 2016. This article is excerpted from McKinley's broader study *Masculinity and the Paradox of Violence in American Fiction, 1950-75* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2015). McKinley draws similar conclusions about paradoxical masculinity to this study, although she views this through the lens of classic existentialism rather than the broadly psychoanalytical approach I take here.
50. Millett 314.
51. Barney thought there was an intricate "constellation between Mailer, Gilmore and Harry Houdini". Hans-Ulrich Obrist, "Interview with Matthew Barney and Jonathan Bepler", *museum in progress* undated. Web. 28 December 2015. One idea that is explored in *The Executioner's Song* is that Gilmore was distantly related to Houdini. Barney also states that "When Mailer was young he looked an awful lot like Houdini". See the picture of Houdini at the end of this chapter.



## Chapter 7. Later non-fictions: *The Fight* and *The Executioners Song*

*Mailer in Africa: The Fight and Henderson the Rain King*

I'm absolutely against political correctness. I think something invaluable went out of the world when ethnic groups stopped insulting one another. And it's not that I promulgate it, it's not that the media should take it up, but the trouble is it's gotten down to individual discourse. And in the old days, it was a sign, you really knew what you were ready to fight for, and what you weren't. If you were Jewish, like myself, you had to make certain basic distinctions early in life. Would you fight if someone called you a dirty Jew, or wouldn't you?<sup>1</sup>  
(From an interview with Christopher Hitchens, 1997)

What made me take this trip to Africa?<sup>2</sup>  
(Henderson in *Henderson the Rain King*)

Ali is Russian, Ali is Oriental, Ali is Arabic, Ali is Jewish.<sup>3</sup>  
Don King, *The Fight*

*The Fight* (1975) is a love letter to the art of boxing. It is also a curious love letter to Muhammad Ali, the first global black sporting superstar. Mailer's self-confessed "love affair with the Black soul" (35), and with Ali, draws on a language of courtship between black and white males that runs through American literature. This national myth was first identified by Leslie Fiedler in his 1948 essay "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in Huck Honey!"<sup>4</sup>, but was given an explicitly political spin nine years later in Mailer's "The White Negro". In that essay, Mailer argued that African American language and culture, but also sexuality and violence, were responses to specific historical pressures and experiences. Because of these experiences, black Americans had forged a uniquely creative response to the conflicts of modernity, a response that was finding an outlet in the cultural and racial hybridity of the fifties counter-culture, and "in this wedding of the white and the black it was the Negro who brought the cultural dowry".<sup>5</sup> What was distinctive about "The White Negro" was its fusion of mythology and politics: the essay's radicalism is inseparable from its much-criticised romantic fascination with

blackness. For good and ill, “The White Negro” remains Mailer’s definitive statement on race in America.

*The Fight* extends the interests of “The White Negro” into the very altered racial politics of the nineteen seventies, an era where black power and pan-Africanism were major forces in American racial discourse. And it at this very moment that Mailer’s love affair with the “Black soul” is at its most conflicted. This chapter will explore some of the historical reasons for that conflict. These historical factors, however, underpin imaginative cracks or breaks in the fantasy of black-white courtship which are beginning to enter Mailer’s work. At heart, these conflicts, or “fights”, revolve around questions of identity. In a later interview with Christopher Hitchens, Mailer suggests that the struggle to bear or forge an ethnic identity can be thought of as a kind of fight. If so, what stakes were at play for Mailer’s own identity in Zaire? One answer I will ultimately suggest in this chapter is that Mailer’s is especially interested in this book with his own Jewish identity, and that this bears on his ambivalent feelings about black power and politics. But perhaps the best place to start is with the book’s relationship to Africa itself.

In her short but influential book *Playing in the Dark* (1991), Toni Morrison writes about what she calls an Africanist presence in the mainstream of American fiction. Morrison defines the word as follows: “I use it as a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, reading, and misreading that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people”.<sup>6</sup> Morrison’s definition of Africanism draws on the same assumptions that Edward Said uses in his book *Orientalism* (1978), the founding work of postcolonial studies. For Said, the critical task in reading Western texts is to pay attention to discourses of knowledge and interpretation that structure the representation of the Orient. Postcolonial criticism, like cultural studies more generally, is sometimes guilty of reducing the literary imagination to discourse analysis. But what distinguishes Said and Morrison as critics is an imaginative sympathy they retain with the very literary works they put under critical scrutiny. And for Morrison, the white mainstream of

American writing is interesting precisely because of its imaginative engagement with Africa. Morrison's book asks questions about how the American literary imagination is "shaped"<sup>7</sup>, as opposed to merely discursively bound, by this encounter.

An important aspect of this shaping is the imaginative encounter with previous literary and historical texts, which American writers like Mailer both draw on and attempt to creatively transform into something like their own terms. *The Fight* is a work conscious of its Africanist predecessors. Mailer references a host of literary works about Africa: Conrad, Hemingway, Amos Tutulola's *The Palm-Wine Drunkard* and Vachel Lindsay's poem "The Congo". Mailer also acknowledges a debt to his reading of twentieth century ethnography, which we shall return to later. What I want to claim, however, is that *The Fight* has an unacknowledged debt to Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King* (1958). Mailer had certainly read and admired Bellow's African novel, which was published about the same time as "The White Negro" and which shares several of its racial and imaginative themes. He once wrote in an essay that "I don't know if any other American writer has done Africa so well".<sup>8</sup> There are good reasons to see *Henderson the Rain King* as a significant African predecessor to *The Fight*.

In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison offers a short but suggestive reading of *Henderson the Rain King*:

Saul Bellow ends the hero's journey to and from his fantastic Africa on the ice, the white frozen wastes. With an Africanist child in his arms, the soul of the Black King in his baggage, Henderson dances, he shouts, over the frozen whiteness, a new white man in a new found land.<sup>9</sup>

Two things here are especially important to note. Firstly, as I will try to show, both a "Black King" and an "Africanist child" play important symbolic roles in Mailer's book. The second point is structural: towards the end of *The Fight*, Mailer gives an account of his long journey home from Kinshasa to New York. Mailer's sleep is disturbed by an incident at a stop-over in Dakar, where "a mob, convinced Muhammad Ali was on board" (227) insist on searching the plane. A young American stewardess with a

bullhorn addresses the crowd in French:

The crowd looked at her. They hardly moved. She was tall and thin with a quintessentially American face, honest, good-featured, strong, a hint stingy, and she would never reveal a sense of humor too quickly to strangers. The crowd heard her out in distrust. She was a representative of the powers of vested white deceit. (236)

A number of things are going on here: an American stewardess translating to the crowd in an alien but still colonial language (she is anxious about her French, which Mailer records in full); the passionate African reception of Ali as the symbolic “Black King”; a halfway house encounter between the African and the American. Mailer’s description of the stewardess and her colleagues heavily emphasises their classic American femininity; he records gifting them copies of his recent book *Marilyn*. This is not only about the symbolic authority and status of air travel (Ali was very impressed by the black pilots he met in Zaire<sup>10</sup>), but also about the idea that air travel itself is a kind of Hollywood production. As we saw in chapter 4, descriptions of blondes are often in Mailer symbolic markers for the American nation. This symbolic return to America echoes the journey home of *Henderson the Rain King*, and in particular the “sweetcorn and gold”<sup>11</sup> Midwestern stewardess who delivers the child to Henderson, and who reminds him of the faithful wife, Lily. The parallel endings of *Henderson the Rain King* and *The Fight* are suggestive of a shared mythology, where whiteness connotes a maternal return to home. And in both books, Africa represents a landscape where Americans go to lose and find their identity.

But if there are mythological parallels between the two books, *The Fight* differs from Bellow’s fantastic journey in its explicit political consciousness. The key figure here is of course Muhammad Ali. Ali’s blackness was critical to his complex sporting and political identity, and indeed to his glamour.<sup>12</sup> Ali’s appeal to Africans partly lay in his embodiment of the civil rights movement in America. Moreover, his refusal to be drafted during the Vietnam war also aligned him with the global anti-colonial politics of

the sixties. At a time when black Americans were reclaiming their African identity, and in the first romantic flush of the postcolonial era, Ali was both a black and an international icon, a poster boy for the politics of authenticity and pan-Africanism. His appeal was glamorously American, but his identity as a Muslim was also key to his political identity. Ali himself saw the fight as being about more than just boxing: it was about an attempt to “establish a relationship between American blacks and Africans”.<sup>13</sup> There was something messianic about Ali in the sixties, when his celebrity glamour connected deeply to this moment of political utopianism. Mailer’s affection and political sympathy for Ali was far from unique, but it is all over *The Fight*. It is also highly qualified.

One reason for this is that the interests of those behind the fight had very little to do with the politics of anti-colonialism. Mobutu Sese Seko, the president of post-colonial Zaire, saw the fight as an opportunity to consolidate his status as an African leader internationally. A master of exploiting pan-Africanist feeling, Mobutu saw the political and trade potential of hosting the “Rumble in the Jungle” for a global audience. Mailer saw Mobutu as a manipulator and a “closet sadist”, an African equivalent of Stalin.<sup>14</sup> Mailer cites Mobutu’s role in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba, the radical nationalist and the Congo’s first-post independence prime minister. Mailer saw Mobutu’s exploitation of Lumumba’s symbolic image as central to his authoritarianism (105). This was *authenticité* as cynical politics. In *The Fight*, Mailer observes Mobutu’s “eclectic” (29) approach to political and economic alignments. But his main point is not a Cold War one, but about Mobutu as the authoritarian personality and the builder of the tribal-technological city: the Africanist despot.

Mailer’s reading of Mobutu and his redesigned Kinshasha is revealing about his wider Africanist politics. The Kinshasha that Mailer sees on his assignment is a city of ghosts. However, these were not for him the ghosts of King Leopold and the Belgian empire, but the ghosts of more recent history. Mailer rejects the idea of Mobutu’s Congo as a “heart of darkness”, writing that Zaire was “a long way from Joseph Conrad and the old horror” (23). Instead, Mailer saw Kinshasha as a merging of the styles of



the American architect Edward Durrell Stone and Franz Kafka. The new Kinshasha was a blend of hypercapitalist architecture, nationalist symbolism and tribal iconography designed to promote the glory of its chief. The Kinshasha Mobutu was presenting to the world and to reporters consisted of a complex of casinos and hotels directly linked to the airport by a huge four-lane motorway that had been built in the months leading up to the fight. Of Mobutu's presidential compound, Mailer writes that

this pretentious Nsele with its two-mile drive and its hordes of emaciated workers in the watermelon fields [...] was a technological confection equal to Nasa or Vacaville, a minimum security prison for the officers of the media and the bureaucrats of the world (23).

Mobutu's very architectural pretentiousness was in this sense overdetermined: in itself it revealed an anxiety to conceal Kinshasha's poverty and slums from the world's press. But there is also an important clue here: one of the things that Mailer is looking for in Africa is some kind of solution to the modern and its rationalised sense of space. If Mobutu's Kinshasha is not for him the answer, he still writes that "Somewhere in the middle of this, there may be an idea – the marriage of modern technology with elements of African tradition" (111). This combination of the modern and the traditional, the new and the primitive, is precisely what Mailer seeks not only in Africa but in his idea of blackness itself. In this respect, *The Fight* truly is an heir to the ideas of "The White Negro".

This not only informs Mailer's romantic identification with black politics, but also his love affair with boxing as a sport. Heavyweight boxing in this period was dominated by African Americans, and the division was closely linked in the popular imagination with racial politics. The historian Mike Marquesee notes that fights frequently were seen as "morality plays on the theme of black representation".<sup>16</sup> But to speak simply of the politics of boxing is I think to mischaracterise what was really appealing about the sport to Mailer. *The Fight* is about boxing as an artform, and what intrigues Mailer is the aesthetics of the sport's specific physical and psychological qualities. The book

is a celebration of boxing as “a twentieth-century art”, with Ali as its representative genius. Above all, Mailer believes that modern boxing was a way to understand blackness: “boxing had become another key to revelations of Black, one more key to black emotions, black psychology, black love” (43). The stylistic contrast between Ali the dancer and trickster, and the relentless power of what Mailer calls the “negritude” of George Foreman<sup>17</sup> is sometimes seen as a contest between two black cultural styles. In Mailer, descriptions of blackness are always in danger of sliding into stereotypes of superior black physicality and sexuality, and these ideas are undeniably present in his description of the contest. What is interesting about *The Fight*, however, is how Mailer ties these ideas of blackness to that of language: throughout, a key value of blackness is that of eloquence.

Mailer is primarily interested in black culture as an oral culture. The fight in one sense was a confrontation between the famously loquacious Ali and the at that time rather more taciturn Foreman. Again and again in *The Fight*, Mailer ties in Ali’s physicality with his orality. Mailer was not alone in this: as the notoriously mouthy Louisville Lip, Muhammad Ali has often been celebrated for his embodiment of black linguistic prowess. Ringcraft and verbal agility in Ali’s case are often thought of as intimately connected: echoing Ali’s famous winning ring strategy against Foreman, scholars of black language talk about the way that black signifying practice “tropes-a-dope”.<sup>18</sup> There is also something of the idea of living on one’s wits. Here there is a connection to “The White Negro”, which praises black culture’s orality over its literacy. “The White Negro” endorses the “lifemanship” of black culture, by which he means a practical street intelligence. The value of black culture for our modernity, Mailer suggests, is that in America it has always been a culture of survival. In “The White Negro” Mailer recounts an intellectual party discussion between a black friend and a white woman:

Of course the Negro was not learning anything about the merits and demerits of the argument, but he was learning a

great deal about a type of girl he had never met before, and that was what he wanted. Being unable to read or write, he could hardly be interested in ideas nearly as much as lifemanship, and so he eschewed any attempt to obey the precision or lack of precision in the girl's language, and instead sensed her character (and the values of her social type) by swinging with the nuances of her voice.<sup>19</sup>

Black intelligence for Mailer is distinct from the over-educated sophistication of square bourgeois culture. There is something in this insight which is central to the very idea of hip. Mailer is open to the charge, however, of downplaying the real cultural value literacy has had for black Americans, from Fredrick Douglass on. In *The Fight*, Mailer is specifically trying to identify himself as an intellectual with the assumed verbal ease and effortless masculinity of black boxers.<sup>20</sup>

What shouldn't be overlooked here is the sincere artistic effort to understand boxing in terms of writing, to find in boxing's physical and gestural terms metaphors for linguistic form. This has a long history, not always connected with race. William Hazlitt's 1822 essay "The Fight" is an obvious predecessor of Mailer's book. The critic Tom Paulin writes that in this essay Hazlitt "offers the rapid, slogging, muscular action of boxers as his supreme image for prose".<sup>21</sup> Mailer's thirty-five page description of the fight, written in a style both kinetic and cinematic, is always reaching for analogues between boxing and writing. But there are as many pages again in *The Fight* written on Ali's press conferences. These public performances are oratorical in a way that often suggests a link between the art of boxing and the art of speaking. The semi-literate Ali thinks of boxing as a kind of physical literacy, stating that "you here who write about boxing are ignorant of what you try to describe. You writers are the real fools and illiterates" (65). One of the contests that run throughout *The Fight* is between writing and orality: between Mailer and Ali, and Mailer and a particular version of blackness. This is not to suggest that his affection for Ali is any less of a romance. Competition is central to this as a love affair.

Boxing in *The Fight* is both science and art, as well as a kind of African magical

thinking. The boxer is thus both scientist and *féticheur*. Ali, the “boxing scholar” (67) in this respect shares several traits with King Dahfu in *Henderson the Rain King*. In “Some Children of the Goddess”, Mailer described Dahfu as follows:

Dahfu is a philosopher-king, large in size, noble, possessed of grace, complex, dignified, elegant, educated, living suspended between life and death. The King, delighted with his new friend, takes him into the secrets of his mind and his palace, and one begins to read the book with a vast absorption because Bellow is now inching more close to the Beast of mystery than any American novelist before him. Dahfu is an exceptional creation, a profoundly sophisticated man with a deep acceptance of magic, an intellectual who believes that civilization can be saved only by a voyage back into the primitive, an expedition which he is of course uniquely suited to lead.<sup>23</sup>

What impresses Henderson about Dahfu is the latter’s belief that tribal ritual and Western learning can be reconciled. Dahfu’s wisdom and his masculine courage are thus models for the American self in its quest of self-renewal (Dahfu is a prime example of the Bellovian “reality instructor”). *The Fight* at its most mythic views Ali as the heroic “Black King”. In one of the book’s most famous passages, Mailer takes an early morning jog with Ali and hears what he assumes to be a wild African lion, which turns out to be safely contained in a Kinshasha zoo. Mailer calls on the spirit of Hemingway and Melville’s white whale in this episode, but it is pertinent that the animal symbol of the African King in both *The Fight* and *Henderson the Rain King* is the lion. The identification of Dahfu/Ali with the lion, the becoming-animal of the King, is of course very close to the idea of the noble savage, and is key to the Africanist pretensions of both books. The idea of Ali as African royalty is established right at the start of *The Fight*:

There is always a shock in seeing him again. Not live as in television but standing before you, looking his best. Then the World’s Greatest Athlete is in danger of being our most beautiful man, and the vocabulary of Camp is doomed to appear. Women draw an audible breath. Men look down. They

are reminded again of their lack of worth. If Ali never opened his mouth to quiver the jellies of public opinion, he would still inspire love and hate. For he is the Prince of Heaven – so says the silence around his body when he is luminous (3)

So natural is our association of Ali with fast-talking that there is something moving about the fact that Mailer finds the stillness in him: silence here takes precedence over language. But this is also coded: in place of American “lip” what Mailer sees here is an implied African nobility.

Mailer’s portrait of Ali’s trainer Drew “Bundini” Brown offers a variation on this theme. Bundini is an important figure in *The Fight* not just because his own adopted identity straddles the American and the African, but because his old friendship with Mailer allows us to see a more intimate side of the black-white romance. Again, the theme is verbal competitiveness. Bundini meets Mailer in Zaire by engaging him in the peculiarly African American form of verbal sparring called “playing the dozens”. The rules of the dozens are simple: it is a game of mother insults (it comes from the same cultural-linguistic field of abuse as “motherfucker”).<sup>23</sup> The winner is the man who can improvise the fiercest insults while retaining emotional control. It is both a form of masculine aggression and testing, and a kind of bonding. But in *The Fight* it is also about the African and the oral:

“Bundini means I’m back in the blood of my people. I’m the steeple. I’m the point of it all. My black heart is beautiful. Bundini! Something like dark is what they say Bundini means. Something like dark,” said Bundini, going back over the translation with relish.  
 “Not quite dark is what it means.” For the first time the Blacks around Bundini laughed a little.  
 “You’re just envious,” said Bundini, “because you don’t have a name in African, motherfucker. You have none of the black juice. The berries in your belly are pale. Your blood is in jail, motherfucker. As you shit, you mumble, you’re afraid of the jungle. You’re afraid of the jungle, motherfucker!”  
 “I just wish my mother was here,” Norman managed to say, “because if she was, she would give you a whupping!” (132)

In a famous essay, James Baldwin infuriated Mailer by writing that his jazz musician friends “did not for an instant consider him as being even remotely ‘hip’ and Norman did not know this and I could not tell him”.<sup>24</sup> While the verbal battle with Bundini is presented with some comical self-awareness, there is the same faintly embarrassing attempt here to mimic blackness (another example of Mailer’s often ventriloquistic masculinity<sup>25</sup>). But at stake here is not simply American hip but African authenticity. Africa is connected here to both virility and vitality, and the source for this is the African name. Spoken language here is a magical source of power - and by implication writing is a kind of civilising castration. Elsewhere, Bundini tells Mailer that the reason he has never learned to read and write is a fear of losing virility: “Reading and writing is Delilah to me” (136). At the heart of their verbal contest is the translation of an African word, and later Mailer states that Bundini is possessed by “Nommo, the spirit of words” (138). Africa is for Mailer in this book the ontological birthplace of revealed and living speech, which is reflected in *The Fight*’s own polyvocality as a literary text.

One of Bundini’s moves in the game here is to suggest, more or less rightly, that Mailer is envious of his claim on an African identity. But that envy also extends to the black American confidence that was being celebrated in Zaire. This envy manifests itself not only in friendly insults, but also in a more serious ambivalence about black politics. Mailer writes that “his love affair with the Black soul, a sentimental orgy at its worst, had been given a drubbing through the seasons of Black Power. He no longer knew whether he loved Blacks or secretly disliked them, which had to be the dirtiest secret of his American life” (35). There are two main sources of this ambivalence, beyond the obvious one of masculinity. The first is professional status. One of the consistent threads in *The Fight* is Mailer’s tendency to measure his own status as the “literary champ” (35) against the hip cultural capital of black Americans: he “could not really bring himself to applaud the emergence of a powerful people into the center of American life – he was envious” (41). The second source of his ambivalence are the implications that black power has for the black-white romance itself. From the late

sixties, Mailer becomes torn between a political sympathy for groups like the Black Panthers and an irritation, which first shows itself in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, with the new black identity. Mailer found the radicalism and violence of black power more exciting than the liberal civil rights movement.<sup>26</sup> Yet this confident and separatist black identity also threatened to break the very fantasy upon which Mailer's love affair with blackness depended in the first place. *The Fight* is a work of mourning because Mailer senses that the love affair is beginning to be no longer reciprocated, or at least not in the way it once was.

At this point, it is vital to consider the role that Mailer's Jewish identity plays in *The Fight*. Mailer writes more about Jewishness in this book than he does in any other place. Far from being a simple black-white romance, Mailer's identification with Ali is as much to do with a historically specific Jewish interest in black culture. A substantial amount has been written about the history of black-Jewish relations in postwar America. This history is politically bound up with the story of postwar liberalism. The historian David Brion Davis has written that "In 1963, at the time of Martin Luther King Jr.'s March on Washington, it was assumed by many American liberals that Jews and African-Americans were natural allies".<sup>27</sup> And as Seth Forman notes in his book *Blacks in the Jewish Mind*, "American Jews of all backgrounds seemed singularly drawn to the enormity of the race question throughout the postwar period".<sup>28</sup> Why were Jewish writers so particularly drawn to this question? Partly it was a matter of simple political liberalism. But the identification went much further. A clue comes from Mailer's interview with Christopher Hitchens, where Mailer argues that forging an ethnic identity is precisely a question of a "fight": "Would you fight if someone called you a dirty Jew, or wouldn't you?". One of the things that Jewish and black Americans had in common in the postwar period is this sense of being a counterculture, of rebelling against a dominant white Protestant society. This is central to the politics of "The White Negro" and *Advertisements for Myself*. And yet, as some commentators have noted, one of the paradoxes of "The White Negro" is that despite its references to the psychic shocks of

the concentration camps, Jewish identity is hardly considered in “The White Negro”.

A case can be made that there is a consistent undercurrent of identification with Jewishness in Mailer’s work, and in later years he declared himself “absolutely attached to Jewish questions”.<sup>29</sup> But he is not, by and large, a writer who foregrounds Jewish themes in the same way as Saul Bellow, Philip Roth or Cynthia Ozick often do. Some possible reasons for this were discussed in chapter 2. What can be said with some certainty is that discussions of Jewish themes become more visible in his work in the wake of the Eichmann trial in 1962. Eichmann’s trial was something of a historical watershed for Jewish American intellectuals. Mailer’s midrash on Martin Buber’s *Tales of the Hasidim* for *Commentary* date from this period. But also at this time Mailer is beginning to bring Jewishness to bear on the ideas he had explored in “The White Negro”:

Besides the Negro has been all but forbidden any sort of intellectual occupation here for a couple of centuries. So he has had to learn other ways of comprehending modern life. There are two ways one can get along in the world. One can get along by studying books, or one can get along by knowing a great deal about one’s fellow man, and one’s fellow man’s woman. Sexuality is the armature of Negro life. Without sexuality they would’ve perished. The Jews stayed alive by having a culture to which they could refer, in which, more or less, they could believe. The Negroes stayed alive by having sexuality which could nourish them, keep them warm.<sup>30</sup>

Mailer is here directly responding to James Baldwin’s essay “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy”, which is both a record of personal friendship and a response to “The White Negro”. In his response, Baldwin lamented “the myth of the sexuality of the Negroes which Norman Mailer, like so many others, refuses to give up”.<sup>31</sup> In “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy”, Baldwin exposes the romantic racial fantasies that underpinned much of white engagement with black culture in the fifties (although it does not abandon the language of black-white courtship). But in his views on black sexuality Baldwin was also a contributor to a debate that was thriving *within* black art



and politics. Cornel West has spoken of “a catch-22 situation in which black sexuality either liberates black people from white control in order to imprison them in racist myths or confines blacks to white ‘respectability’ while they make their own sexuality a taboo subject”.<sup>33</sup> So, while some black institutions during the civil rights era sought to downplay sexuality so as to better make a claim of respectability, the black power movement sought outright to reject what Mailer called “the respectable love life”.<sup>33</sup> One of the reasons that “The White Negro” has proved so enduringly controversial is that it sits precisely on that historical faultline.<sup>34</sup>

What is interesting about Mailer’s response to Baldwin in 1963, however, is that he for the first time outlines the thesis of “The White Negro” in the context of Jewish experience. Mailer is reprising the idea that it is the denial of black Americans of an “intellectual occupation” that has inspired a set of creative strategies for surviving modern existence, or what he called in “The White Negro” “lifemanship”. But at this point he makes a crucial set of moves. First, he argues that in American terms Jews and blacks have had to forge ways of “staying alive”: in other words, they are both historical cultures of survival, and thus draw on common experiences. But he also draws a contrast: where Jews have survived through an intellectual culture of book learning (and here we might remember the influence of his Talmudist grandfather), black Americans have survived by cultivating the body. The identification of black people with the body is of course a classic theme in the history of racism. But I think Mailer is not drawing here the classically racist contrast between mind and body as much as he is drawing a contrast between two different kinds of intelligence (or “getting along in the world”): on the one hand for Mailer there is a Jewish literate culture, and on the other there is an oral black culture (and orality for Mailer is closely linked with survival and street adaptability as well as physical expressiveness). The problem in Mailer is not that there is no historical justification for such a contrast, but that they are for him the dialectically set terms through which he interprets black experience. It is no accident then that the archetype for the black intellectual for Mailer is an athlete like Ali and not writer-

competitors such as James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison.<sup>35</sup>

The Mailer-Ali love affair in *The Fight* is that of the Jewish writer's admiration for the black boxer. Writing about the paradoxes of his allegiance to Ali, Mailer states that

he would not be alone in such a paradox. It was striking how many of the Jewish writers had affection for Ali, a veritable tropism of affection, as if, ultimately, he was one of them, a Jew in the sense of being his own creation. Few things would inspire more love among Jews than the genius to be without comparison (161-162).

This specifically Jewish admiration of Ali is based on a common feeling of singularity.

This is less the language of black-white courtship as much as it is a particularly black-Jewish romance. However, one of the ways that Jewish American writers and intellectuals staked a claim on that kinship in the postwar period was by rewriting and so slyly subverting the classic literary model of black-white courtship. What was provocative about Fiedler's "Come Back to the Raft Ag'in Huck Honey!" was that it outed in Freudian terms a homoerotic subtext in classic American literature. Similarly, "The White Negro" advocated a marriage of the black and the white as a rebellion against a square white protestant culture. The subtext of the romantic Jewish identification with blackness during this era was the Revenge against the Squares.

An unlikely companion text to *The Fight* in this regard is Mel Brooks' comedy Western *Blazing Saddles* (1974). The story revolves around a classic black-white pairing. Bart, the black sheriff of Rock Ridge, and his companion the Waco Kid gang together to outwit the racists and rednecks of the American frontier. The film was substantially a black-Jewish production: the leads Cleavon Little and Gene Wilder were supported by a writing team including Brooks and Richard Pryor. The film can be read as a utopian fantasy of black-Jewish cooperation against American history and white racism. The film's politically incorrect ethnic jokes are all about the incongruous mixing of ethnic styles: a Yiddish-speaking native American chief played by Brooks; black workhands singing white showtunes (Cleavon Little's performance is a small masterpiece of the



**Fig. 15. Cleavon Little and Gene Wilder in *Blazing Saddles* (1974)**

mask). *Blazing Saddles*' politically incorrect anti-racism is perhaps a model for what Mailer means when he writes that "something invaluable went out of the world when ethnic groups stopped insulting each other".

"The White Negro" is an essay about this new hip cultural blending. Mailer's white negroes both in sociological reality and in imaginative fantasy were always implicitly Jewish negroes too. Mailer was later to admire Lenny Bruce, whose comedy explosively combined Yiddish vernacular with hip jazz idiom. *The Fight* brings this imaginative union of black and Jewish style to a new level in Mailer's work. Mailer doesn't simply point to a Jewish identification with Ali; he repeatedly implies that Ali, Bundini and Don King are in some sense honorary Jews. King is described as "a cross between a Negro Heavyweight" and a "Jewish Rumanian doctor" (115). It's worth noting, however, that this union of black and Jewish wasn't simply an *imaginative* romance in the postwar period. Jewish and black sexual and marital unions were increasingly a social fact. As Seth Forman notes, Jewish critics such as Fiedler and Norman Podhoretz had advocated for intermarriage between blacks and whites as a positive step forward for race relations. But more specifically, there is evidence that in the sixties that an increasing number of black babies were being born to Jewish mothers, a fact which was embraced by Fiedler.<sup>36</sup> *The Fight* gives a portrait of one such black-Jewish child, the son of Drew 'Bundini' Brown. Mailer writes:

The last time he had seen much of Bundini was years ago, and Bundini was married then to a Jewish girl. His son, he was proud to tell everyone, had been bar mitzvah. A tall good-looking young black boy with curly Jewish hair, Drew Brown, Jr., used to greet Bundini's Jewish friends with "Sholom, aleichom sholom." To Black friends the boy would remark, "begin running, motherfucker." (127-128).

Drew Brown, Jr. is a living embodiment of the new Jewish Negro. The linguistic incongruity that Mailer plays for laughs here also points to the underlying fantasy of a competitive black-Jewish kinship. The extent of Mailer's investment in this bond is revealed in his "confused" reaction to meeting Bundini's second wife Shere, "a white girl from Texas with red hair, green eyes, a stubborn upturned nose, and a Down Home accent. Shere (pronounced Sherry or Cherie) looked as American as the boy with freckles whose face is on the box of breakfast food" (127). Mailer's confusion points to yet another break in the fantasy, but here it is "Down Home" whiteness that interrupts the fantasy of black-Jewish marital romance. Mailer describes Shere in terms that are familiar from the litany of American dream girls in Mailer's writing, notably the stewardesses he writes about at the end of *The Fight*. There are also remarkable lexical echoes of *An American Dream's* Cherry, perhaps the archetype of the dream girl in Mailer's fiction. Cherry and Shere are Texans, and in both cases Mailer emphasises the "upturned nose"<sup>37</sup> (the identical language used in books ten years apart reinforce the idea that this is meant as an ethnic marker). The fascination with the American dream girl in Mailer is the classic Jewish male fascination with the *shiksa*.

But there is more going on here. Drew Brown Jr. is not only a living example of postwar liberal racial mixing. In the context of *The Fight's* broader literary texture, he is also the imaginative equivalent of the "Africanist child" that Bellow's Henderson returns with on his journey home to the new found land. It should be noted that Toni Morrison misreads Bellow here, at least if we take her at face value. Henderson's adopted child is not in any literal sense African. He is specifically identified as an orphan of racially unspecified American parentage, raised by Persian servants (the child does not speak

English). While the colour imagery is especially slippery in this final chapter, with its condensed browns, blacks and greys, the word that Bellow uses more than once to describe the child is “white”, or “very white”.<sup>38</sup> So, why does Morrison say Africanist? To answer this confusion, we need to look at how this child functions in the novel. Firstly, whatever the precise “racial” background of this infant, he is culturally and imaginatively a hybrid. This child also reconciles the book, and Henderson, to the mixing of identities that elsewhere terrifies and fascinates its hero. Recent criticism of *Henderson the Rain King* notes that hostility to mixing of all kinds is at the heart of the novel’s palette of colour symbolism, which masks Henderson’s own specific anxiety about miscegenation.<sup>39</sup> The American Persian child is a replacement and proxy for the orphan mixed race child that Henderson’s daughter brings home early in the novel. The reality of course is that his daughter has given birth to the child, a fact that Henderson never openly acknowledges. Rather, Henderson rejects the child, clinging to the implausible cover story that the infant is a foundling. This suppressed knowledge is one of the key things that motivates his African journey.

*Henderson the Rain King* is a fiction from a Jewish American writer that is “singularly drawn to the enormity of the race question”. It is perhaps significant that Henderson is one of Bellow’s few non-Jewish protagonists. Like “The White Negro”, *Henderson the Rain King* is concerned with an American culture in denial of the reality of racial mixing, and by implication in denial of the wider racial “hurricane” of modern America.<sup>40</sup> The dream of the social melting pot was turning in the postwar period into the dream of a racial melting pot. Many Jewish American intellectuals of this generation embraced this idea as a way of claiming the American dream as their own. In *The Fight*, the mixed race Drew Brown Jr. clearly points to that aspiration. However, *The Fight* was also written at a time when the black-Jewish relationship was beginning to deteriorate. This is a key story in the liberal post-civil rights era: Seth Forman calls the souring of this dialogue a “crisis of liberalism”.

The historical reasons for this deterioration have been extensively discussed

elsewhere. The relevant question to ask about *The Fight* is whether this historical deterioration in the black-Jewish dialogue can be felt in Mailer's own ambivalence about black power. Mailer speaks to this question in a rare indication of his feelings about Israel:

He even wondered at his loyalty to Ali. A victory for Ali would also be a triumph for Islam. While Norman was hardly a Zionist, and had never gone to Israel, he had been to Cairo and the collision of overflowing new wealth with scabrous poverty, teeming inefficiency, frantic traffic and cripples walking on sores, left him sympathetic to Israel's case. Countries as gargantuan, fascinating, and godawful as Egypt did not deserve to dictate terms to one beleaguered Hebrew idea in the desert. Since he knew little of the politics of the Near East, his politics were as straightforward as that. And conflicted with his loyalty to Ali. (161)

This is a remarkable passage in Mailer's work. It is one of the very few places where he has anything to say about Israel, and it is by his own admission not an especially sophisticated position. A sympathetic reading of Mailer's relationship to Judaism might be that he is an example of what Isaac Deutscher called the "non-Jewish Jew".<sup>41</sup> There are some places in his work where his identification with Jewishness, and the Jewish mind in particular, is grounded on cosmopolitan, humanist premises. Speaking about his late novel *The Castle in the Forest*, Mailer claimed that "part of the disaster that Hitler visited upon us" was to push the Jewish mind towards a "cheap religious patriotism", and for Mailer this meant a distortion of a more open Jewish tradition.<sup>42</sup> It is not surprising then that he claims to be "hardly a Zionist". Whatever one makes of this, Mailer's rejection of religious or cultural nationalism is completely consistent with the rest of his politics. A less sympathetic reading might point to how little Mailer is interested in Israel or middle eastern politics even as a subject in the wake of the Yom Kippur war. Not long after Mailer was visiting Egypt and Zaire, Saul Bellow was writing *To Jerusalem and Back* (1975), a rather different work of transatlantic non-fiction. Nevertheless, something about visiting Egypt seems to have stirred in Mailer an

attachment to Israel as a “beleaguered Hebrew idea in the desert” (a rather rose-tinted view of Israel in 1974). And it this sympathy that leads to a conflict in his loyalty to Muhammad Ali. It is not surprising that Mailer should have felt so divided on this issue. Israel was a common faultline in the black-Jewish dialogue. The conflict in the middle east was the single most important non-domestic issue that divided black and Jewish Americans after 1967. Mailer’s thoughts on the Nation of Islam and Louis Farrakhan towards the end of *The Fight*, provisional as they are, foresee trouble ahead:

Norman had the uneasy intuition that sooner or later his admiration for Ali could change to the respect one felt for a powerful and dedicated enemy. No turn was too sinuous for the tricks of history. (233).

Mailer’s intuitions were wrong about Ali, but probably right about Farrakhan, who would take the revived Nation of Islam in a more anti-semitic direction in the eighties and nineties.<sup>43</sup>

Why, however, when Bellow was visiting Jerusalem, was Mailer visiting Egypt? Certainly this had nothing to do with middle-eastern politics, but the demands of his own imagination. Mailer was beginning work on his major Egyptian novel *Ancient Evenings*, and on his way to Zaire to cover the fight stopped off in Egypt. The experience was disappointing. Mailer’s description of Cairo in *The Fight* is a textbook example of orientalism, full of clichés about “teeming inefficiency” and “scabrous



**Fig. 16. Mailer and Ali: friendship and competition**



poverty". What was imaginatively disappointing for Mailer about this experience, however, was precisely the *modernity* of Cairo in 1974. He has elsewhere written that the experience was "ruining my vision" of his imagined ancient Egypt because it had "nothing to do with Egypt of antiquity".<sup>44</sup> *Ancient Evenings* is not simply a historical fiction but a radical attempt to step outside of the modes of thinking of Judaeo-Christian civilization. Mailer was looking for something in Egypt that was radically alien to the very idea of the modern: his immersion in Ancient Egypt and its soul-concepts was a way of rethinking death, memory and the borders of the self. The book's exploration of civilization and its discontents was rooted in 19th century Egyptology, notably the works of E Wallis Budge, and also followed on from writers like Flaubert and Thomas Mann. But I would like to propose another predecessor for *Ancient Evenings*: Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). While Freud's highly speculative work is not seen as historically plausible, its exploration of the ideas of religion, memory, history and textuality have secured it a place as a major work in the history of ideas, valued by theorists including Edward Said and Jacques Derrida.<sup>45</sup> As a "non-Jewish Jew" writing at the time of the *Anschluss* of Austria in 1938 (he wrote much of the book in exile from the Nazis in England), Freud was seeming to erode the very basis of a coherent historical Jewish identity. Subsequent scholarship has regarded Freud's work, however wild its speculations, as a careful exploration of the idea of historical identity, and Jewish identity in particular.

The parallels with *Ancient Evenings* shouldn't be pushed too far. But the books do share common themes: paternity, writing, memory, and the roots of religion. *Ancient Evenings* can also be read as an even more radical Bloomian misprision of Jewishness. Of course, Mailer was writing under different historical pressures from Freud. But it is curious that at a time when other Jewish intellectuals such as Bellow were looking more closely at the implications for identity in the actual politics of the middle east, Mailer was going back to a place, Ancient Egypt, which was closely bound up with the history of the Jews in one sense but in another completely alien to Jewish theology



and traditions. Mailer's polytheistic, magical and exotic Ancient Egypt is precisely pre-historical in the sense that Freud would have understood it not only in *Moses and Monotheism* but in his anthropological work *Totem and Taboo*. *Ancient Evenings* tries to imagine a world historically and aesthetically alien from Judaeo-Christian tradition and its bodily and erotic values. However, at one point while writing the book Mailer had intended to write about Moses, based on a historical rumour that Moses lived at the same time as Rameses II.<sup>46</sup> Traces of this plan found its way into the finished novel. In a short but important passage in *Ancient Evenings*, the exiled Metenhetet learns the secret of reincarnation from a Hebrew prisoner who learned it from a "Hebrew magician named Moses"<sup>47</sup>, who may or may not be the historic Moses. This small and enigmatic point of Jewish contact with Mailer's aesthetically hermetic Egypt does suggest that Mailer was at least interested in a comparative theology between the polymorphously perverse Egyptian lifeworld and monotheism.

*Ancient Evenings* remains a little understood work, and these remarks are only a gesture towards an interpretation. What can be said is that Mailer was looking for something in modern Egypt that he did not find there, but did find on the next stage of his African journey in Zaire. Mailer's main guide to African culture and thought in Zaire were a set of ethnographic texts and collections which he had picked up in a New York bookstore on an interim visit to America. Mailer's main source was *Bantu Philosophy* (1945), a book by the Belgian missionary Placide Tempels that was a founding work in what would become known as ethnophilosophy. The historian of African philosophy Richard Bell writes that ethnophilosophy began as an attempt to extract a systematic metaphysics from the language and culture of tribal societies.<sup>48</sup> According to Bell, ethnophilosophy superficially shared aims with the anti-colonial *négritude* movement in the arts. But for Bell the attempt to codify a singular "Bantu philosophy" has now been discredited. The term "Bantu" covers a vast geographical area, and encompasses in this usage a number of disparate tribal and linguistic traditions. But ethnophilosophy's other flaw was that while it did attempt to take seriously African thought, it was still intimately

tied in with the colonial project. Take for example this passage from Tempels:

We do not claim, of course, that the Bantu are capable of formulating a philosophical treatise, complete with an adequate vocabulary. It is our job to proceed to such systematic development. It is we who will be able to tell them, in precise terms, what their inmost concept of being is. They will recognise themselves in our words and will acquiesce, saying, 'You understand us: you know us completely: you 'know' in the way we 'know'.<sup>49</sup>

This is a rather choice quote for a postcolonial reading. A major premise of postcolonial theory is that Western colonialism throughout its history can be thought of as a series of codifications and systematisations of colonised peoples and their ways of life. For a critic like Edward Said, Western representations and "misreadings" are deeply bound up with geopolitical and economic power. Ethnophilosophy has sometimes been regarded as a counterweight to that history of Western interpretations, but *Bantu Philosophy* ultimately accepts colonialist premises. What is remarkable about this passage from *Bantu Philosophy* is that the knowledge that is being systematised here goes all the way down to the core of being. This is ontological essentialism *par excellence*.

Mailer draws much of his ideas about Africa from a reading of *Bantu Philosophy* and other ethnographic texts such as Janheinz Jahn's *Muntu, the New African Culture* and Mercel Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*. Written and compiled by European scholars, these books are all connected, at least in the context that Mailer reads them, to the radical politics of cosmopolitan New York. Mailer presents his discovery of these books in the "warren" (37) of the University Place Book Shop as a piece of animistic good fortune ahead of his trip back to Africa. But the bookshop (a specialist black studies bookshop founded in the thirties by Walter Goldwater at the height of the *négritude* movement<sup>50</sup>) also connotes what the sociologist Pierre Bordieu calls a *habitus*<sup>51</sup>, a set of habits and ways of thinking and reading socially embedded in a way of life. Perhaps the most famous illustration of that *habitus* in literature is Frank O'Hara's "The Day Lady Died":

I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun  
 and have a hamburger and a malted and buy  
 an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets  
 in Ghana are doing these days

I go on to the bank  
 and Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard)  
 doesn't even look up my balance for once in her life  
 and in the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine  
 for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do  
 think of Hesiod, trans. Richmond Lattimore or  
 Brendan Behan's new play or *Le Balcon* or *Les Nègres*  
 of Genet, but I don't, I stick with Verlaine  
 after practically going to sleep with quandariness<sup>52</sup>

O'Hara's poem, among many other things, is about an easily identifiable intellectual culture, that of fifties and sixties avant-garde New York. O'Hara is describing a kind of hip cultural ennui, a style of navigation through culture and daily life that is both banal and casually interconnected. The poem is not just about reading books, but the bookshop denotes a particularly condensed form of "quandariness", of selecting between global artefacts and translations (one suspects that O'Hara's stroller is as much concerned with the cultural capital, or more winningly the physical beauty, of these books as he is with their contents). But O'Hara's poem is also about how New York intellectuals read the poets in Ghana alongside the works of Behan and Genet, in translation or otherwise. The habitus that these authors belong to is an assumed fifties and sixties politics, which Mailer himself spoke directly to not only in "The White Negro" but also in his review of Genet's *The Blacks*. The liberal New York interest in the politics of *négritude* is in fact the subject of Mailer's review. Mailer's suggestion that it might be more politically courageous to perform Genet's play in the South rather than for New York liberal audiences is, in effect, a challenge to the habitus of the play's conditions of performance.<sup>53</sup>

Mailer's reading of *Bantu Philosophy* must be read as emerging from that habitus all the same. The relevant question here is: what distinctive imaginative use does he make of these books, and how does this relate to the Africanist politics of *The Fight*? Mailer

first of all identifies with Bantu philosophy on ontological grounds:

Given a few of his own ideas, Norman's excitement was not small as he read Bantu Philosophy. For he discovered that the instinctive philosophy of African tribesmen happened to be close to his own. Bantu philosophy, he soon learned, saw humans as forces, not beings. Without putting it into words, he had always believed that. It gave a powerful shift to his thoughts. By such logic, men or women were more than the parts of themselves, which is to say more than the result of their heredity and experience. A man was not only what he contained, not only his desires, his memory, and his personality, but also the forces that came to inhabit him at any moment from all things living and dead. So a man was not only himself, but the karma of all the generations past that still lived in him, not only a human with his own psyche but a part of the resonance, sympathetic or unsympathetic, of every root and thing (and witch) about him. He would take his balance, his quivering place, in a field of all the forces of the living and dead. (38)

*Bantu Philosophy* appealed to the primitivist component of Mailer's imagination. As with the Egyptian studies that would influence *Ancient Evenings*, Mailer is finding in these books ideas about the self that he will explore more thoroughly using another mythological framework in the later fiction. The major ontological premise of Mailer's primitivism is that humans are forces rather than "beings" in the Western sense. If we are more than our heredity and experience, one might say that we are also more than our *habitus* (and perhaps this is the point). There is a romantic pantheism at work here which some critics rightly describe as Jungian rather than Freudian (even at his most wildly speculative, Freud is precisely concerned with "heredity and experience" in the positivistic sense that Mailer here rejects).<sup>54</sup> African philosophy gave Mailer a way of reimagining ideas that his fiction and non-fiction had long been playing with, and to which he was later to give more extended and serious treatment.

How seriously, however, are we to take Mailer's treatment of African philosophy in *The Fight* itself? This might credibly be dismissed as yet more Mailer exoticism. African philosophy provided Mailer with a smattering of words and ideas which were useful for

thinking about the fight and were a stimulus to imaginative digressions of varying sorts. But the book does also lapse at times into a kind of Mailerized mumbo-jumbo. With that said, there are two ways in which African philosophy plays a key role in *The Fight*. The first is the book's overall preoccupation with the theme of language, both written and oral. Mailer is most interesting on Africa when he riffs on words and concepts: *muntu*, *kuntu*, *n'golo* and *Nommo*, the Word itself. In his reading of Griaule's *Conversations with Ogotemmêli*, Mailer picks up on the idea of the materiality of spoken language:

Ogotemmêli looked on the gift of speech as analogous to weaving since the tongue and teeth were a warp and woof on which the breath could serve as thread. Given reflection, the idea was not so unsound. What, after all, was conversation if not a psychic material to be stitched by the mind to other psychic cloth? If most conversations ended in rags, so did most textiles. (54)

Mailer uses these ethnographic ideas about language as a counterpoint to the orality of the fight's protagonists. But he also uses these ideas to explore notions of the materiality of writing and speech which, again, would re-emerge in *Ancient Evenings*. The oral here is imaginatively linked again not only with the material but with the entire sensual world itself. In Mailer's reading of the Ogotemmêli, the psychic and the material are not regarded as separate substances as such.

*The Fight's* recording of multiple voices and perspectives is also part of the "warp and woof" of its own literary texture (in a sense, its own "materialism"). But the book is also concerned in its very ontology with the historical aspect of the voice. A second use of African philosophy that *The Fight* consistently makes is to tie its ontology with the idea that "history is an organism, and reveals a sense of style, a divine stroke of the pen to every era" (221). The notion of history being advanced here is again psychic-materialist in the sense that it proposes lines of communication between the living and the dead. What Mailer is interested here is the way in which the past is embodied in the present, and in *The Fight* this means the ways in which the ghosts of history are played out not merely in the fight's symbolism but in the very physical gestures and speech of the fighters themselves, beyond their immediate "heredity and experience" and even

their prescribed roles. Mailer's apparently idiosyncratic connections between boxing, hypermodern chess, anti-colonial politics and African philosophy have a certain logic when seen from this perspective. Muhammad Ali in this version of history embodies "the play of forces between those who are living and those who are dead" (239). This is highly romantic as politics, and it is balanced by the more nuanced political analyses that Mailer pursues. But there is no doubt that Mailer is sincere in believing that African philosophy represents a bridge between the traditional and the modern, and even a certain spirit of Marx (221). In the logic of African tales, Mailer wants to suggest, can be discovered an alternative economy which he calls "an economy of mood" (239).

However, looked at from the perspective of *The Fight's* Africanism, what is interesting about this reading of *Bantu Philosophy* is the way in which Mailer gives ontological priority to blackness as a value. Blackness, and Africa itself, is presented in *The Fight* as a primordial and virile source of being. Gerald Early writes in a highly critical essay on *The Fight* that

the blackness of boxing reinforced not simply its primitivism (which it surely did) but the sheer poeticism of its paganism, the sense of its being not only before but beyond Christianity and its repressions.<sup>55</sup>

*Ancient Evenings* was to give a very different perspective on that paganism, but we can see here a common reaching for a mythological counter-modernity. Early traces the romanticism of Mailer's identification with blackness to the primitivist politics of "The White Negro", and he is interesting on that essay's sometimes acute but highly partial account of black American experience: "Mailer has constructed his own sense of himself by identifying not simply with the rights of the Negro but the Negro's darkness".<sup>56</sup> Again, the politics and the myth are seemingly interlinked. Yet in this chapter we have seen that Mailer was exploring a more complex construction of the self in *The Fight*. For a number of historical and imaginative reasons, including Mailer's own Jewishness, the romance with blackness is not quite as total here as it was at the time of

“The White Negro”. What is clear, however, is that Mailer had not abandoned the idea of an essential “black psyche”, nor the claim to a special insight into it.

*The Executioner's Song and the art of the found object*

*The Executioner's Song* (1979) records the events leading up to Gary Gilmore's execution in January 1977 with a language that signals a final departure from the subjective modes of the New Journalism. The book is composed in a famously minimalist “Plains voice” that stylistically renders the flat texture of everyday life in Gilmore's Utah. In her early review of the novel, Joan Didion suggests that the tonal flatness of this voice effectively captures the experience of the American West:

The authentic Western voice, the voice heard in *The Executioner's Song*, is one heard often in life but only rarely in literature, the reason being that to truly know the West is to lack all will to write it down. The very subject of *The Executioner's Song* is that vast emptiness at the center of the Western experience, a nihilism antithetical not only to literature but to most other forms of human endeavour, a dread so close to zero that human voices fade out, trail off, like skywriting.<sup>57</sup>

The paradox this reading presents is that while *The Executioner's Song* “takes for its incidents and characters real events in the lives of real people”, at the heart of this voice lies a “nihilism” where human experience and literature itself recedes into a sparsely populated landscape of gas stations and motels. The obvious literary model for the paratactic blank writing of *The Executioner's Song* is Ernest Hemingway (this stylistic turn to Hemingway is clearly another staging post in Mailer's love affair with the American sentence). While the book is a significant literary experiment, Mailer claimed to have had in mind an analogy with contemporary art while writing *The Executioner's Song*. In an interview, Mailer stated that his earlier “expressionism” was giving way to a literary form of “photographic realism”. This move away from expressionism was a key shift in the avant-garde after the fifties, and not just in photographic realism. A relevant reference point here is Ed Ruscha's *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations* (1963), whose stark photographs of





**Fig. 17. Ed Ruscha, from *Twenty Six Gasoline Stations* (1963)**

depopulated gas stations re-inscribe the blankness of pulp American architecture into the epic iconography of the West.<sup>58</sup>

A number of critics have identified *The Executioner's Song's* anti-expressionism with the aesthetics of postmodernism. Many of the markers of postmodern aesthetics are here: an elimination of the author; a “close to zero” minimalism; a foregrounding of concerns about texts and their interpretation. Ronald Schleifer, for example, reads the book’s elimination of the “bombastic” Mailer style as an index of a movement to postmodernism (which Schleifer stages in terms of an aesthetic dialogue with the documentary realism of Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*). For Schleifer, Mailer’s book is a Flaubertian “‘book about nothing’, a book whose events, finally, are inconsequential because its protagonists and its happenings are so thoroughly ordinary”.<sup>59</sup> Schleifer writes that Gilmore’s unintelligible and seemingly motiveless murders embody “the arbitrary nature of the sign” under postmodernism. The aesthetic complement to this arbitrariness of signs and meaning is a zero horizon of interpretation: Mailer “presents but does not authorize interpretations”<sup>60</sup>, and so Schleifer claims that any sign on any page can stand in for the reader as an interpretative centre. Phyllis McCord similarly



argues that in its fragmentation of signs and viewpoints, *The Executioner's Song* “enacts through its form the idea that there is no immediate experience, no world except that created by consciousness and language”.<sup>61</sup> These readings of *The Executioner's Song* effectively present two separate readings of postmodernism itself: (a) postmodern inconsequentialism (arbitrariness of sign and meaning, the nihilistic drift of experience, zero degree aestheticism) and (b) postmodern textual perspectivism. It's reasonable to say that *The Executioner's Song* formally interrogates these two positions. This is quite different from claiming, however, that the book fully endorses these standpoints either ethically or in its overall aesthetic texture.

Central to the book's anti-expressionism is Mailer's extensive and careful use of documentary “found objects” such as interviews, court transcripts, newspaper articles, and Gilmore's extraordinary prison letters to Nicole Baker. The term comes from painting, and it's worth looking at Mailer's explanation of the “found object” in detail:

You know, a painter may find something on the street that he thinks is incredible. Sometimes he'll glue it right into the painting. It becomes part of the work. In *The Executioner's Song* newspaper stories became part of the painting and part of the transcript of the trial – a lot of found objects. I felt acted upon, in a funny way, while doing this book, by painting terms. It was as if I'd shifted from being an expressionist, not an abstract expressionist, but an expressionist – like Munch, or Max Beckmann... those kinds of painters who worked with large exaggeration and murkiness and passionate power – into being a photographic realist, even a photographic realist with found objects. The reason, I think, is that a painter like a writer sometimes gets to a point where he can no longer interpret what he sees. Then the act of painting what he literally sees becomes the aesthetic act. Because what he's seeing is incredible. It may or may not be possessed of meaning. Reality, itself, closely studied is mysterious, and it's elusive.<sup>62</sup>

The core of the “aesthetic act” described here is the selection, arrangement, and juxtaposition of “found objects” into the narrative. By incorporating fragments of the real into the work, Mailer hopes to bring the reader to an intimation of “reality, itself”.

Yet by this he clearly doesn't mean a naïve "realism": this is not primarily about the veracity of these objects as documents. Still less, however, is this about a postmodern version of perspectivism. The haunted ontological question here, as in much of Mailer, is the nature and meaning of the real, that spooky substratum of experience that lies behind everyday experience. The crucial distinction to make here is that Mailer's use of "found objects" is perspectivist, but not relativist. The difference between Mailer and a strict postmodern perspectivist is that while for the postmodernist reality and meaning are constructed, for Mailer reality is absolute but numinous. The aesthetic value of the found object lies in this facticity, in a *concrete* relationship to the "mysterious". In many of these objects there is something like Barthes' photographic punctum: a stray "extraordinary" detail that illuminates ordinary events; a collision of fragments that offers a brief shock of meaning.

A further formal feature of *The Executioner's Song* is its division into two halves, "Western Voices" and "Eastern Voices". The "Western Voices" in a geographical and ideological sense belong to what are now sometimes called America's "fly-over" states, here Mormon Utah. At the level of fictional texture, however, *The Executioner's Song* represents the West in the primordial terms of American myth. The recurring motif of the "apple tree", present from the book's first sentence, explicitly suggests the pastoral imagery of Edenic innocence. The major theme of "Western Voices" is that of the Fall, through its exploration of childhood and memory, innocence and experience, and the knowledge of good and evil. At the heart of this is the enigmatic, ambiguous love story of Gilmore and Nicole Baker, whose home at Spanish Fork represents an idyllic refuge from the various prisons of family, the past, and everyday social-symbolic life. The conception of the Fall at play here is that of the traumatic loss of innocence. The spare style and white spaces of the text in this sense function to represent inarticulate gaps in subjectivity. The key figure here is Nicole, whose selfhood and behaviour is substantially underwritten by childhood sexual abuse. Nicole's apparent indifference and passivity to the unfolding of events (to anything but Gilmore) is typical of this kind of empty

selfhood, although here ordinary appearances can be deceptive. Nicole repeats her early experience with “Uncle Lee” in one abusive relationship after another, and one of the central unresolved questions of the book is whether the relationship with Gilmore is a redeeming grand passion unto death, or instead (or perhaps simultaneously) the latest instalment of a series.

The question of innocence and experience extends more widely over the flow of everyday life in Utah. The protagonists as a whole seem to find only minimal coordinates for their identity in conceptions of past or future, and so drift through lives touched by violence and criminality. Moreover, everyday life proceeds at a certain remove from the wider discursive national “reality”, a reality whose signifiers are nevertheless inscribed in the fabric of daily existence. The beer that Gilmore shoplifts signifies, as Schleifer notes, an entire field of symbolic practices of leisure and consumption. The *theft* of this beer therefore also signifies Gilmore’s status as a subject positioned beyond the symbolic law.

But the beer functions as something more than a mere signifier. It also functions as a kind of fetish object, a placeholder for subjectivity. The beer in this sense foreshadows the pickup truck that provides the superficial financial motive for the events that lead to the seemingly senseless murders of Jensen and Bushnell. Virtually absent from Mailer’s account of the murders is any representation of Gilmore’s interior state (this is the polar opposite of the frenetic subjectivity of *An American Dream*). Instead, Mailer focuses on Gilmore’s inexplicable, even absurd, obsession with buying the truck. Gilmore’s obsession so surpasses the truck’s inherent value that it stands as an enigmatic object of (violent) desire. This substitution of car-as-technology-object for the subject leads directly back to “A Note on Comparative Pornography”. And yet as a signifier the pickup truck fits into a precise network of textual meanings. The automobile is a symbol of Western frontiers and American freedom; it has an economic value as an object of consumer desire (and inserts Gilmore into the system of credit); it is the material precondition of the landscape of gas stations and motels. Matthew Barney’s art-film *Cremaster 2* (1999), an imaginative



**Fig 18. Still from *Cremaster 2* (1999)**

post-humanist reworking of *The Executioner's Song*, plays on just this techno-fetishistic relationship of Gilmore to the American automobile and the West.<sup>63</sup>

In “Eastern Voices”, *The Executioner's Song* opens itself out to the national discourse. Politically, the book is a product of the transitional Carter presidency (the Gilmore story broke nationally on Election day 1976). Christopher Hitchens writes that Mailer grasped something essential about the Gilmore case, “that a stone-cold killer who really wanted to die was the negation of bleeding-heart liberalism and an intuitive curtain-raiser for the Reagan years”.<sup>64</sup> The first “Eastern Voice”, Gilmore’s lawyer Dennis Boaz, embodies the idealistic-cynical tone of post-sixties liberalism. The “Reign of Good King Boaz” is a small fable about the fate of sixties activism as it moved both inward and rightward during the seventies.<sup>65</sup> Like the sixties in general, Boaz had turned from hip political radicalism towards questions of the self, and his interest in Gilmore’s right to die ideologically combines the language of the consciousness movement with a conservative position on the death penalty. A second major “Eastern Voice” is the journalist Lawrence Schiller, who was also Mailer’s collaborator on the book. As a narrative device, Schiller personifies the “postmodern media event” that invades the pastoral idyll of Provo, Utah. The muted tone of the “Plains voice” gives way to the discursive chatter of the activist groups, lawyers, and media interests that pour into the town. The idea of the Fall at play in “Eastern Voices” is precisely this fall into postmodern discourse.

There is one other apparent “found object” in *The Executioner's Song*: the “old prison rhyme” that prefaces and concludes the book. Mailer acknowledges in the after-matter

that this fragment is in fact an “invention”, a poem of the same name that he had published more than ten years earlier. This act of self-reference does perhaps add another fictionalising layer of postmodern textuality to the mix. But is there another function of this fragment? Let us look more closely at this first version of “The Executioner’s Song”:

*Deep in the dungeon I welcome you here.  
 Deep in the dungeon I worship you here.  
 Deep in the dungeon I dwell  
 I do not know if I wish you well*<sup>66</sup>

In including this fragment Mailer may have been, as Schleifer argues<sup>67</sup>, signalling his rejection in *The Executioner’s Song* of his previous authorial “bombast”. But there may be something more textually and ethically ambiguous at work here. The question here is: who is the nameless “I” of this poem? Is the “executioner” the State in an abstract juridical sense, or the anonymous members of the firing squad that carry out Gilmore’s execution? Or, as Mailer later reflected<sup>67</sup>, is the executioner Gilmore himself, the perpetrator of two seemingly meaningless and random murders? *The Executioner’s Song* is, among other things, an exploration of the waste of violence, violence’s destruction of human potentiality. Yet perhaps another way of looking at this fragment is to turn the question around, to examine the dungeon itself as a figure. The archaism of the word contrasts with the modern idea of the humane administered prison. The dungeon here as “wishing well” is a clear figure for the archaic unconscious and its violent drives. In the Gilmore case the death penalty reappears in American society as a violent return of the repressed, a return which had lasting legal, social and human consequences.

*The Executioner’s Song* belongs to a much wider discourse in the seventies of the prison and prison reform (we might here pause to acknowledge Mailer’s ill-fated role in the release of Jack Henry Abbot, which precipitated the second great disaster of Mailer’s life when Abbot murdered a young waiter weeks after his release). The Gilmore book is roughly contemporary with Michel Foucault’s genealogical work about the birth of the prison *Discipline and Punish* (first published in French in 1975). Reading the works side by side is a fascinating exercise of comparative analysis of literature and theory.

Both are concerned with the regulation of body and soul within modern administered societies (what Foucault calls the “carceral” discursive regime). Where Foucault analyses the history of the regulatory discourse of the prison, Mailer charts its human and social effects: the social horror of guilt and execution; the relationship between individual and state violence (shorn of the more romantic formulations of “The White Negro”); the interplay of physical death and soul death<sup>69</sup>, and the existential impasses of prison time. There are arresting overlaps between Foucauldian and Mailerian ideas on crime and punishment. Foucault notes a historical discursive shift away from punishment of the body, towards the carceral regime of humane regulation and reform of souls. In the carceral regime, the model of punishment as spectacle is disavowed:

[I]n punishment-as-spectacle a confused horror spread from the scaffold; it enveloped both executioner and condemned; and , although it was always ready to invert the shame inflicted on the victim into pity or glory, it often turned the legal violence of the executioner into shame. Now the scandal and the light are to be distributed differently; it is the conviction itself that marks the offender with the unequivocally negative sign: the publicity has shifted to the trial, and to the sentence; the execution itself is like an additional shame that justice is ashamed to impose on the condemned man; so it keeps its distance from the act, tending always to entrust it to others, under the seal of secrecy.<sup>70</sup>

This not only very fittingly describes the Gilmore case, but in its view that modern justice “keeps its distance from the act” it also echoes the Mailerian view that death is precisely that which is disavowed and repressed in modernity. Gilmore’s execution was conducted “under the seal of secrecy”; the fascination with death in the Gilmore case was displaced onto the legal process itself, as postmodern media spectacle. *The Executioner’s Song* is an ethical work of literature precisely because it does not aim to offer just one more interpretation of these events among many. Rather, it somewhat inconsolably wants to bring the reader closely to the full human and social weight of justice and guilt, of executions and executioners.

1. Christopher Hitchens, "A Minority of One: An Interview with Norman Mailer." *New Left Review* 222 (1997): 115.
2. Saul Bellow, *Henderson the Rain King*, (1958; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996) 3.
3. *The Fight* (London: Penguin, 2000), 117. Citations are hereafter bracketed in the text.
4. *An End to Innocence*, 142-151.
5. *Advertisements for Myself*, 273.
6. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard UP, 1991) 6-7.
7. Morrison 16.
8. *Cannibals and Christians*, 156.
9. Morrison 59.
10. See Ali's discussion of black African pilots in Leon Gast's documentary *When We Were Kings* (1996).
11. *Henderson the Rain King*, 334.
12. Among the extensive literature, an interesting account of the political Ali comes from Mike Marquesee, *Redemption Song: Muhammad Ali and the Spirit of the Sixties* (London, New York: Verso, 1999).
13. Micky Z, "Ali, Foreman and the Congo. Rumble in the Jungle at 30", *Counterpunch* 26 October 2004. Web. 17 September 2013.
14. *When We Were Kings*.
15. According to historians such as Georges Nzongla-Ntalaja and Ludo de Witte, while Lumumba stood for the politics of nationalism and Cold War non-alignment, his successor Mobutu was the head of a neo-colonial state supported and endorsed by Western interests, in particular Belgium and the United States. Georges Nzongola-Ntalaja, *The Congo from Leopold to Kabila: A People's History* (London; New York: Zed Books, 2002); Ludo de Witte, *The Assassination of Lumumba* (London; New York: Verso, 2001). In *Harlot's Ghost* (1991), Mailer's counter-history of the CIA, the assassination of Lumumba features briefly as a murky episode of Cold War politics.
16. Marquesee 41.
17. See *When We Were Kings*.
18. This phrase is sometimes attributed to Henry Louis Gates, although he attributes the pun to Kimberly W. Benston. See *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 52.



19. *Advertisements for Myself*, 282.
20. “And since the great champions of our time have been black, Mailer’s preoccupation with masculinity is a preoccupation with blackness as well”. Joyce Carol Oates, *On Boxing* (London: Bloomsbury, 1987), 54.
21. Tom Paulin’s introduction to William Hazlitt, *The Fight and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 2000). xv.
22. *Cannibals and Christians*, 157.
23. Lewis Hyde discusses the dozens as an African American extension of the trickster myth in *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008), 271-274. See also Jim Dawson’s discussion of the dozens in *The Compleat Motherfucker: A History of the Mother of All Dirty Words* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2009), 31.
24. Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 175.
25. This ventriloquistic relationship to black orality also has a serious literary use. *Why Are We in Vietnam?*’s narrative should be read as a sophisticated act of black ventriloquism. But the most obvious example is Shago Martin in *An American Dream* (a character loosely based on Miles Davis). Shago appears in the novel as an irruption of oral idioms and tropes in the text. In this example, Rojack’s defeat of Shago is an example of how the perceived virility of black orality is both acknowledged and contained by the white American hero.
26. See “Looking for the Meat and Potatoes” in *The Essential Mailer*, 523-537, and *The Prisoner of Sex*, 52.
27. David Brion Davis, “Jews and Blacks in America”, *New York Review of Books* 2 December 1999: 57.
28. Seth Forman, *Blacks in the Jewish Mind: A Crisis of Liberalism* (New York, London: New York University Press, 1998), 3.
29. “A Conversation with Norman Mailer and Dr. Christopher M. Leighton”, *The Institute for Christian and Jewish Studies*, Volume 8, Autumn, 1998.
30. *The Presidential Papers*, 160-161.
31. Baldwin, *Nobody Knows My Name*, 174.
32. *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Civitas, 1999), 518.
33. *Advertisements for Myself*, 272.
34. “The White Negro” was taken up in the sixties by supporters of the idea of black macho. Eldridge Cleaver supported “The White Negro”, in an essay where he also attacked Baldwin in homophobic terms. See “Notes on a Native Son” in *Soul on Ice* (London: Panther, 1971), 96-107. Michele Wallace has written about Mailer’s increasingly



conflicted love affair with the “Black Soul” in *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: The Dial Press, 1979), 41-50.

35. In “Some Children of the Goddess”, Mailer makes the extraordinary suggestion that “it is possible that Bellow succeeds in telling us more about the depths of the black man’s psyche than either Baldwin or Ellison”. *Cannibals and Christians*, 157.

36. Forman 120-122.

37. *An American Dream*, 97.

38. The colour palette in this chapter slips in and out of racial codings, e.g. “The walls were white as eggs, and the brown Arabs in their clothes and muffles watched us arise from the sterile road” (327). But the American-Persian child is described as “very white” (335) and his “face is too white from your orphan’s troubles. Breathe in this air, kid, and get a little color” (340). Whiteness here is associated with the sterile and the pale boy who is made healthy and renewed by the Atlantic crossing and blackness. It is in this sense that this chapter is “Africanist” in Morrison’s terms.

39. See Carol R. Smith, “The Jewish Atlantic - The Deployment of Blackness in Saul Bellow” in *A Political Companion to Saul Bellow* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013).

40. My reading here is that in *Henderson the Rain King* Bellow’s politics were still essentially in the liberal mainstream on this issue. His biographer James Atlas notes that he was a supporter of civil rights in the sixties and in 1964 wrote an unpublished preface about the murder of three Mississippi Freedom Summer volunteers. See James Atlas, *Bellow: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 344. If this is an accurate reading (and Atlas suggests that even at this point Bellow was no simple liberal), then it was only later that Bellow would turn to a conservative racial politics, most notably in *Mr Sammler’s Planet*, as a reaction against the sexual liberalism of the sixties. The later Bellow had a very different attitude to the racial melting pot, and was concerned about the influx of black Americans into the Hyde Park area of Chicago. It’s worth noting, however, that Carol R Smith gives the anti-miscegenation themes in *Henderson* a less sympathetic airing.

41. Edward Said discusses Deutscher and this tradition of dissenting Judaism in *Freud and the Non-European* (London; New York: Verso, 2003), 52-53.

42. Quoted in “Norman Mailer: 1923-2007”, *Jewlicious* 10 November 2007. Web. 10 July 2015. The blogger, ck, expresses a common view of Mailer’s attitude to Jewishness when he writes “he’s been everything from ambivalent and ignorant to grudgingly respectful.”

43. In 1991, the Nation of Islam published a book called the *The Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews: Volume One* that argued that Jews had a particular culpability for the slave trade. This thesis was widely denounced as anti-semitic, and was a key driver of the historical reconsideration of black-Jewish relations in the 1990s. See Jack Salzman and Cornel West, eds., *Struggles in the Promised Land: Toward a History of Black-Jewish*

*Relations in the United States* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.

44. *Pieces and Pontifications*, 189. From *Pontifications*.

45. Edward Said discusses *Moses and Monotheism* at length in *Freud and the Non-European*. See also Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), which discusses Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi's reading of Freud's text in relation to questions of historical memory.

46. Lennon 502.

47. *Ancient Evenings* (London: Picador, 1984), 376.

48. Richard Bell, *Understanding African Philosophy: A Cross Cultural Approach to Classical and Contemporary Issues* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 21-24.

49. Placide Tempels, *Bantu Philosophy* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1959), 25.

50. "New York City Bookshops in the 1930s and 1940s: The Recollections of Walter Goldwater", *autodidactproject.org*. Web. 9 December 2014.

51. Pierre Bordieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 166.

52. Frank O'Hara, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1994), 146.

53. See *The Presidential Papers*, 229-230.

54. See Ashton Howley's chapter "Imperial Mailer" in *Norman Mailer's Later Fictions*, 105-119.

55. Gerald Early, *Culture of Bruising: Essays on Prizefighting, Literature, and Modern American Culture* (New Jersey: The Ecco Press, 1994), 59.

56. Early 59.

57. Quoted in Manso 607.

58. Ruscha claimed that it was Andy Warhol who first pointed out to him that there were no people in his gas station photos. Mary Richards, *Ed Ruscha* (London: Tate, 2008), 31. I have also been influenced here by Owen Hatherley's discussion of Pulp Modernist "Googie" architecture in *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain* (London, New York: Verso, 2010), xxiv-xxv.

59. Ronald Schleifer, *Analogical Thinking: Post-Enlightenment Understanding in Language, Collaboration, and Interpretation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 161.

60. Schleifer 169.

61. Quoted in Schleifer 172.

62. "An Interview with John W. Aldridge" in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, ed.

Michael Lennon (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1988), 269.

63. Barney's creative re-imaginings of Mailer's writing often feature the technological fetishism of the car: see his recent adaptation of *Ancient Evenings, River of Fundament* (2014).
64. Hitchens, "Remembering Norman Mailer, the pint-size Jewish fireplug".
65. There are significant parallels between Boaz and Jerry Rubin, Yippie, March on the Pentagon organiser, and one of the Chicago 8. In the seventies, Rubin abandoned political activism first for the consciousness movement, and subsequently for Reaganite entrepreneurialism. Mailer consulted Rubin heavily while writing *The Armies of the Night*.
66. *The Executioner's Song* (New York: Vintage, 1998), front matter and 1050.
67. Schleifer 167.
68. *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, 236.
69. There is also a question here of what Lacan calls in his discussion of Antigone the "two deaths": real physical death and the symbolic death of the subject. The "ethics" of the Gilmore case rotate around Gilmore's right to choose physical extinction over the "civil death" of the prison. *The Executioner's Song* in this sense ought to be read as a tragic conflict between two "rights": Gilmore's right to die and the rights of other death row prisoners (predominantly African American) whom his execution would by consequence legally condemn. What distinguishes this case from the tragic situation, however, is the *perversity* of Gilmore's ethical choice: Gilmore defies the law through his excessive attachment to it. See Jacques Lacan, "Antigone between Two Deaths" in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), 332-353. See also Žižek's explication of the two deaths in *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* (London; New York: Verso, 1999), 155.
70. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), 9-10. Foucault's methodology here though is only residually psychoanalytical and is not committed to what he would later call in *The History of Sexuality* the repressive hypothesis.

## Chapter 8: Modernism and mass culture in the age of Reagan: *Ancient Evenings and Tough Guys Don't Dance*

*Ancient Evenings* (1983) is Mailer's most extreme creative metamorphosis, and among the more unusual and perplexing American novels of the postwar period. Set during the nineteenth and twentieth dynasties of ancient Egyptian civilization, the novel is a slow, detailed meditation on civilization and its discontents, a project animated by Mailer's predominant obsessions with death, rebirth, magic, eroticism and power. In the last chapter, we saw that Mailer in this book was attempting to imaginatively step outside the patterns of thinking of Judaeo-Christian civilization through Egyptian soul-concepts and burial rites, and thus to find some aesthetic alternative to a desensualised modernity. Mailer wanted to surpass Thomas Mann<sup>1</sup> in his immersion in the otherness of Egypt's ritualistic premodernity and, as Nigel Leigh notes, went to great pains to "avoid unconsciously modernizing the material".<sup>2</sup> The book has an uneasy reputation, but it is a serious if flawed stylistic achievement in the lineage of other modern exotica of its kind such as Gustave Flaubert's *Salammbô*.

*Ancient Evenings* is a radically negative work of modernism in the sense most associated with Theodor Adorno, through its utter exclusion of everyday empirical reality. However, at the very end of its 700 pages, Mailer includes its dates of composition, 1972-1982. This is something of a signature of modernist authorship, like the *Trieste-Zurich-Paris 1914-1921* with which Joyce concludes *Ulysses*. But these dates also inscribe the historical reality which the fiction itself takes pains to exclude. As we have already seen, Mailer's imaginative vision of Egypt came at a historical price when it came to viewing modern Egypt and the wider politics of the middle east. This immersion in the deep past has also been read by some commentators as a flight from *American* political reality in 1972-1982. Richard Godden regards the Egypt book as a withdrawal from the political engagement of fictions of capital such as *Why Are We in Vietnam?* and *Armies of the Night*. Mailer's body politics, Godden suggests, have here

become historically arid: in *Ancient Evenings* “the male seed has become the vehicle of much repetition but very little history and absolutely no politics”.<sup>3</sup> In this reading, the novel is a parody of post-sixties liberal impotence. Aesthetically reductive as this might seem, there is justification for this point of view. Even for a more sympathetic critic of the novel like Leigh, the novel’s immersion in the deep past is founded on a “nostalgia born of radical pessimism”.<sup>4</sup> And if there is a variety of nostalgia at play in *Ancient Evenings*, then it can be understood as part of a larger cultural trend. Andreas Huyssen has pointed to an “intense search for viable traditions in the 1970s”, a search typified by a series of Egypt exhibitions which Huyssen disparages as displaying “a nostalgia for mummies and emperors”.<sup>5</sup>

*Ancient Evenings* does seem to mirror this inward and backward looking trajectory of post-sixties art and culture. But this tells us very little about its aesthetics or the specific politics of its modernism. One reason for this is that the book is not only an aesthetic revolt against a disenchanted modernity, but also against Mailer’s own more overtly “political” non-fiction, a tension we already saw playing itself out in *The Fight*. For it is hardly the case that Mailer stopped writing about contemporary America in this period. During the long gestation of *Ancient Evenings*, Mailer took periodical sabbaticals to “immerse myself again in daily matters of American life”<sup>6</sup>, including the two major works discussed in the last chapter. This was not a total modernist withdrawal so much as it was a newly historically pressured iteration of a longstanding aesthetic tension in Mailer’s work between art and life, fiction and journalism. Mailer’s complicated financial life was a major factor in the making of these aesthetic decisions<sup>7</sup>, but there is also something here of a *compulsion* to return to America and its politics as a subject.

The follow-up to *Ancient Evenings*, the neo-noir crime novel *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* (1984) represents just such a compulsive return to American themes. The novel, written to deadline in a matter of months, is usually considered as a contract-filler potboiler, “another expression of the author’s diverse literary repertoire”<sup>8</sup>, and an easily digestible literary “hamburger”<sup>9</sup> following the rich dish of *Ancient Evenings*. The style of

one book in Mailer is often a reaction to a previous style. In *Tough Guys*, Mailer moved from the slow modernism of *Ancient Evenings* to pulp fiction. This was partly financially expedient and partly a homage to the detective genre. But the book's homage/pastiche of Raymond Chandler<sup>10</sup> also belongs to the high point of eighties postmodernism, a discourse that Fredric Jameson regards as intimately related to Reaganite ideology about America's nostalgic relationship to its own cultural past.<sup>11</sup> *Tough Guys* was written in the era of neo-noir cinema such as *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *Blue Heat* (1981) and *Blood Simple* (1984), and Mailer later adapted his novel into a high camp, and now cult classic, film that was influenced by David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), perhaps the key example of eighties cinematic postmodernism. And although like *Ancient Evenings* it has often been regarded as a work with "no politics"<sup>12</sup>, it is also *politically* a work of the eighties. The novel is at one level of reading a satire on the machismo and acquisitiveness of the Reagan era and its twin backlashes against feminism and the nineteen sixties. If it is interested in the archetypes of the classic American "tough guy", it is also more broadly preoccupied with American masculinity in the era of AIDS. In *Tough Guys Don't Dance's* baroque plotting, both liberalism and maleness are under pressure.

The national theme is established at the start of the novel. A central metaphor in the book is *addiction*, not only to cocaine, sex, marijuana and booze but also to America itself. The tale is told by Tim Madden, a Provincetown writer and part-time bar man, who wakes on the "twenty-fourth drear morning after my wife had decamped" (1), having spent his time drinking and smoking heavily and suffering from writer's block. Madden's efforts to "kick the habit" (4) of his partner is not only associated with his failed attempts to quit smoking, but also to a libidinal addiction to nation: "She was as insatiable as good old America, and I wanted my country on my cock" (180). Madden associates cigarette withdrawal with American consumer confidence: "In the throes of not smoking, I might rent a car and never notice whether it was a Ford or a Chrysler" (3). Mailer's first published pages after the long withdrawal of *Ancient Evenings* offer a self-parodic fictional echo of his own most serious writerly ambitions: after the major

Egypt book comes a very American work about petty vice and hedonistic consumption.

The setting is at some distance from the heartlands of Reagan's America. The book is a love letter to Provincetown, Massachusetts, which along with Brooklyn Heights was Mailer's home for most of his writing life. The town is famous for its fishing and whaling, but is also known as a home for artists, bohemians, and a large summer gay population. *Tough Guys Don't Dance* is saturated with a sense of what the writer Michael Cunningham calls Provincetown's "bemused distance"<sup>13</sup> from the rest of national life. In a nod to this bohemian history, the movie adaptation is haunted by the ghosts of two murdered Provincetown whores, who are literally invoked in the movie's high camp séance. The murderous and orgiastic forces of American history are at work in this landscape (the original Pilgrim fathers first landed on Provincetown before arriving at Plymouth Rock). Mailer affectionately thought of Provincetown as the "Wild West of the East", and as well as its obvious tribute to detective fiction and *noir*, the novel's cast of outlaws, high class carpetbaggers and crooked police chiefs do place it as a kind of Western. And ideologically as much as geographically it pits East against West, bohemia against manifest destiny.

It is the arrival of two California strangers Lonnie Pangborn and Jessica Pond, who remind Madden of "characters in a soap opera" (24), that sets in motion the plot's unlikely chain of grisly events. Money, drugs and real estate - Santa Barbara and Palm Beach values - are at stake here. If women are often markers in Mailer for national themes, then what is being conjured here through Jessica Pond is "Republican California": "Perfectly groomed blondes remain as quintessential to such places as mustard on pastrami. Corporate California had moved right into my psyche" (18-19). In a first sign of the novel's preoccupation with uncanny doubling, the sexuality of the classic *femme fatale*, Pond reminds Madden not only of his estranged wife Patty but also the porn star Jennifer Welles. Madden's description of Welles evokes the national geography of the text: she had "well-turned promiscuous breasts - one nipple tilted to the east, one stared out to the west" (18). The *femme fatale* segues into the seventies porn



star here, but there is also an echo of Fitzgerald's East and West Eggs from *The Great Gatsby*, a novel which we discover his socially ambitious wife Patty has read (56). These archetypes and their psychogeography inform the political plot of the novel.

The next morning Madden rises with a hangover, a fresh tattoo, and little recollection of the night's events. He has also found blood on the front seat of his wife's Porsche. Following a tip off from the new Acting Chief of Police, Alvin Luther Regency, Madden goes to check his marijuana stash in the woods of nearby Truro. There he finds a decapitated blonde female head. It is, however, uncertain whether it belongs to his wife Patty or Jessica Pond, or if Madden himself is the killer. The novel's sleuth-work is driven as much by Madden's repressed guilt as by the conventional lines of enquiry of detective fiction. When a second blonde head in the stash is discovered, Madden is assured of his literal innocence, but his behavior continues to be determined by anxieties concerning identity that the narrative has unleashed. These anxieties, as the title suggests, are closely related to anxieties about masculinity. Madden is primarily locked in oedipal struggle with his father Dougy, a comically tough Irish ex-docker, who retains his tough guy nickname Big Mac "in defiance of all MacDonald hamburgers" (77).

*Tough Guys Don't Dance* is clearly having bad taste fun with Mailer's own macho image and reputation as a scourge of feminist critics. Yet for all this conscious provocation, the novel is also in some strange way a morality play about misogynistic violence. The book is in this sense having it both ways. Reading the novel, one is often reminded of Kate Millett's claim about Mailer that "he always seems to understand what's the matter with masculine arrogance, but he can't give it up".<sup>14</sup> Millett identifies here the double attitude towards masculinity in Mailer that I discuss in chapter 6. But a further implication here is that masculinity is a habit, and more precisely an *addiction*. The themes of addiction to nation and masculinity are intertwined in the novel, which explores the seriocomic potential of maleness, balancing an affectionate wry nostalgia for macho excesses (Dougy Madden), with a forensic comprehension of masculinity's



toxicity and violence (Regency).

Dougy is an old-fashioned tough guy (played in the film by the Poverty Row gangster movie star Lawrence Tierney) who belongs to America's labour past. And like the unionism that he represents, in the amoral world of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* Dougy is an anachronism. Dougy's masculinity is itself mythological: he embodies a bigoted but relatively benign form of the codes of conduct expected of the "real man".<sup>15</sup> *Tough Guys Don't Dance* invites us to find Dougy's stoicism and stony unforgivingness comic, but it also invites a certain nostalgic respect for its heroism and implicit morality (and keeping it implicit is a masculine virtue par excellence). Part of what makes Dougy forbidding and at times admirable is that he embodies a kind of maleness that staunchly refuses to show any public signs of vulnerability or weakness. The critic David Savran has argued that the stoic theme of "taking it like a man" implies the "contradictions connected with a masculine identification":

It implies that masculinity is not an achieved state but a process, a trial through which one passes. But at the same time, this phrase ironically suggests the precariousness and fragility – even perhaps the femininity – of a gender identity that must be fought for again and again and again.<sup>16</sup>

The kind of maleness that Dougy endorses is never settled once and for all: a lifetime of reputation may be unraveled in a moment's weakness. In the novel, Dougy attributes



**Fig. 19. Ryan O'Neal and Lawrence Tierney as Tim and Dougy Madden in *Tough Guys Don't Dance***

his cancer diagnosis to a story from his union days where he was shot by a gunman. Dougy pursues his attacker for many streets before finally relenting and seeking hospital treatment for his wounds. And no matter what the circumstances, giving up is the beginning of the end for masculinity. It is as if being a tough guy has ultimately something to do with the outrunning of death. This idea is concisely summed up in the movie version:

Six months ago, they told me to stop or I was dead. I stopped.  
Now the spirits circle around my bed and they tell me to dance.  
I tell 'em, 'Tough guys don't dance.' They answer me, 'Keep dancing'.

The idea here is that masculinity never “stops”, that tough guys not only never give up but *can't* ever give up and retain their legend. Cancer for Dougy is not only weakening in itself but it is a disease *caused* by weakness.<sup>17</sup> The paradox of masculinity is that while its key value is stoic self-control, it imposes itself in a series of absurd and unachievable demands to “keep dancing”, to keep one step ahead of death. The novel's title, which comes from an old anecdote about the gangster Frank Costello, is an exact formula for that double bind.

Tim Madden's conflicted relationship to his father defines his relationship to masculinity in the world. One formula for fatherly love is a kind of loving indifference, and in this sense Dougy's readiness to “deep six” the decapitated heads for Tim is a very precise expression of love. However, Dougy is also a character who has very strict ideas about masculinity and what he expects from his son. In a slightly test interview with the gay magazine *The Advocate*, Mailer acknowledged Dougy's bigotry and anti-gay attitudes.<sup>18</sup> Madden as a child of the sixties is relatively more socially liberal than his father (although Dougy's experience of cancer slightly softens his position on gay rights in the era of AIDS). Yet his actions are often motivated to placate the paternal superego, to demonstrate to Dougy that he is not a queer or a “cocksucker”. He gains Dougy's approval when he tells him “I took my three years in the slammer without a fall” (254). Asserting oneself as a real man here is closely bound up with standard

macho anxieties about homosexuality, weakness and the pecking order (no wonder *The Advocate* weren't exactly fans). Several of the male characters are at pains to avoid being made a patsy by a woman or a punk by a man, and for the would-be tough guy these are for all practical purposes the same fate. The cuckolding of Lonnie Pangborn by Madden is in part a way of displacing anxieties about Tim's own masculinity after his abandonment by Patty Lareine. Madden's memory loss on that evening is a screen not just for his murderous impulses but also his homoerotic ones: perhaps Madden even fears that he has killed Pangborn in a moment of gay panic.<sup>19</sup>

Madden's desire to assert himself as a man also has a political subtext. *Tough Guys Don't Dance* is a parable for sixties liberalism under pressure. The important conflict here is not with his tough guy left-wing father but with the right-wing conservative police chief Regency. The echo of Reagan in Regency is no accident: a former partner of Regency's is called Randy Reagan. The novel describes Regency as follows:

He was large enough to play professional football, and there was no mistaking the competitive gleam in his eye: God, the spirit of competition, and crazy mayhem had come together. Regency looked like one Christian athlete who hated to lose.  
(48)

Regency's core personal animus toward Madden, which is the driving force of the detective plot, is ultimately politicised. *Tough Guys Don't Dance* revolves around Regency's plot to frame Madden for the deaths of Patty Lareine and Jessica Pond. This revenge is ostensibly personal: Regency is now married to Madden's former lover Madeleine, and holds him responsible for involving her in orgies and the car accident that left her unable to have children. But this revenge plot is also motivated by the desire to "frame" sixties liberalism in general, and it is this spirit of conservative retribution that is at the heart of this drama of buried heads in the marijuana patch. Regency's motto is "Vengeance is mine, saith the lord" (147), and this spirit of retributive machismo connects to a wider spirit of revenge in eighties popular culture. As Savran notes, the central historical trauma here was the American failure to win the war in Vietnam.<sup>20</sup>

Sylvester Stallone's Rambo series, and especially the 1985 installment *Rambo: First Blood Part 2*, was an open wish fulfillment revenge fantasy. Both novel and film of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* reflect that conservative backlash.

Regency, played in the movie by real-life college football player and actor Wings Hauser, represents a completely different way of "playing" masculinity than the classic model of the tough guy. Hauser plays Regency's machismo with a barely contained and entertaining hysteria:

REGENCY: Life gives a man two balls. Use 'em. It's a rare day I don't bang two women - matter of fact, I don't sleep too well unless I get that second hump in. Both sides of my nature are obliged to express themselves.

DOUGY: Tell me, what are your two sides?

REGENCY: The enforcer and the maniac.

TIM: And who do we have the honour of addressing?

REGENCY: You never met the maniac.

As a self-confessed "enforcer" and "maniac", Regency embodies what Savran calls "the homicidal potential of paranoid white men"<sup>21</sup> in post-Vietnam popular culture. The hallmarks of his personality are authoritarian control combined with its opposite, maniacal frenzy. In this Regency not only resembles the Rambo era spirit of vengeance, but also the Law in its form as Freudian superego. Slavoj Žižek argues that law is always split between its rational public authority and what he calls its "obscene superego supplement".<sup>22</sup> This split between enforcer and maniac in Regency is a split between conservative law and order on the one hand and murderous revenge on the other. The fictional plot largely hinges on the revealing of this duality. Regency is a much less forgiving and deadly variation on the paternal superego than the merely old-fashioned Dougy. In the novel, Madden assess Regency as follows: "There was much to be said for Regency as a cop. Pressure came off him and it was constant. Soon, you made a mistake" (138). The consistent pressure Regency applies aims to expose not just practical inconsistencies in Madden's testimony, but also any signs of liberalism or softness. For Regency, what constitutes machismo is a certain practical intellect,

the ability to assess people and situations with unequivocal and righteous judgement, a quality he calls “acumen” (140). Acumen is not simply an entrepreneurial quality, although this element of Reaganite self-interest is present. It’s also an aggressively masculine trait that smokes out any signs of effeminacy or weakness. In this world, masculinity and femininity are functions not of gender but of whether one takes the active or passive role in sexual and business relations alike.

Indeed, Regency first questions Madden’s “acumen” because he has failed to sniff out that Lonnie Pangborn is a “swish” or a “faggot” (39, 40). Regency has an aversion to gay men which is more fleshed out in the novel but rhetorically ramped up in the movie: “I’m just a country boy, Tim. I’d like to kill homos”. Regency’s rhetoric of vengeance here takes in not only a general assault on sixties liberalism, but a specific conservative reaction to AIDS hysteria. Provincetown’s large gay community plays little role in *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*, but the town is nevertheless a relevant dramatic setting for the revenge plot. A few months before Mailer wrote the novel, Provincetown had been the subject of major media interest after a period of panic that all but shut down summer tourism. Provincetown witnessed a thousand AIDS death at the height of the epidemic<sup>23</sup>, and the atmosphere of fear and reaction made its way into the novel in Regency’s innuendos about the gay “plague” and Kaposi’s sarcoma (141).

Provincetown in the eighties is therefore a charged setting for Mailer’s drama of masculine crisis and homosexual panic. Mailer said that he was preoccupied in the novel with the “spectrum of male behavior”<sup>24</sup> (Mailer here is yet again an ambivalent heir of Kinsey). *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* is not only full of pressured heterosexuals like Madden or homophobes such as Regency, but a number of minor gay and bisexual characters, the most notable of whom is Meeks Wardley Hilby III, renamed Wardley Meeks III in the movie. The name plays on the name of Reagan’s key adviser Edwin Meese III. Meese was Reagan’s leading drug warrior, and the joke is that Mailer lends his name to a rich bisexual lawyer and would be cocaine dealer. Wardley attempts to assert his masculinity and win the avaricious Patty Lareine. The problem for him, however,

is proving his masculine worth to her: “I’ve spent the rest of my life trying to regain property rights to my rectum” (29). Again, as in *The Prisoner of Sex* Mailer’s interest in masculinity in terms of punking and the prison is on display here. One way that Wardley seeks to achieve his “property rights” is to engage in crime and free enterprise. Yet Wardley ultimately gives up on his pursuit of masculinity. Wardley’s character goes to the heart of the book and movie’s ambivalent treatment of masculinity and homosexuality. However sensitive the treatment of his fruitless pursuit of a masculine self, the movie in particular is not above playing Wardley for camp laughs in lines like “I’m so wrong for this kind of imbroglio!”

Mailer was always wary of describing *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* as a work of camp.<sup>25</sup> However, the book’s pastiche of detective fiction and *film noir*, and references to Ronald Firbank clearly link it to camp sensibility. But to see where Mailer’s film fits into arguments about camp, we need to go back to the avant-garde roots of Mailer’s cinematic practice in the sixties. In his essay “Some Dirt in the Talk”, Mailer wrote about his first avant-garde experiment *Wild 90* (1968). The film is a freely improvised movie about gangsters, played by Mailer and his friends Mickey Knox and Buzz Farbar, hiding out in a New York apartment. In this essay, Mailer recalls being conscious early on of making a form of “gangster-movie camp”, but that the project as it developed became a much more serious take on male performance:

There is hardly a guy alive who is not an actor to the hilt - for the simplest of reasons. He cannot be tough all the time. There are days when he is hung over, months when he is out of condition, weeks when he is in love and soft all over. Still, his rep is to be tough. So he acts to fill the gaps. A comedy of adopted manners surrounds the probing each tough guy is forever giving his brother. *Wild 90*, which is filled with nothing so much as these vanities, bluffs, ego-supports, and downright collapses of front is therefore hilarious to such people. They thought the picture was manna.<sup>26</sup>

Mailer was looking for, in other words, a new kind of realism, not one based upon

how gangsters actually are but on an exaggerated idea of how men socially perform. Obscenity and bad taste could thereby be welded to a kind of serious intention. This is not entirely inconsistent with the most famous articulation of camp in the nineteen sixties, that of Susan Sontag, who also drew connections with avant-garde ideas of theatricality: “To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theatre”<sup>27</sup>. Camp for Sontag is merely an extreme form of being that has its roots in the Renaissance ideas of the self. And though Mailer was more guarded about camp as a sensibility, he saw potential in it for a kind of masculine surrealism.

Mailer’s ambivalent exploitation of postmodern camp is key to *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*’s interest in masculinity. His suspicion of camp is partly down to his investment in heterosexual masculinity, but also about an investment in certain kinds of realism that camp wanted to explode. An important strategy behind much cinematic camp is the attempt to expose or deflate masculinity as a masquerade by exaggeration or excessive homage. The confrontational bad taste aesthetics of John Waters can certainly be felt in *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* (Waters also lived in Provincetown and would often have Mailer as a dinner guest<sup>28</sup>). As Sontag insisted, camp is not exclusively a gay sensibility, but it is in its pioneering essence a gay cultural attitude. And in the more gay-conscious culture that was emerging post-sixties and post-Stonewall in America, masculine anxiety and excess was itself beginning to take on some camp undertones as well as menacing ones. The backlash movies of Stallone and Schwarzenegger were also heralds of a new postmodern attitude of pastiche in popular culture that saw “masculinity” itself as increasingly as cartoonish or self-obsessed. As the critic Mark Simpson argues, this was the age of the “male impersonator”.<sup>29</sup> Masculinity was both the visible and aestheticised marker of Reaganite political wish fulfillment *and* a mode of jokey entertainment that was never to be taken too seriously or played with too much realism. And if Mailer wanted to send up the former, he was sufficiently serious about masculinity as a subject to be wary of playing it merely for laughs or to keep it at postmodern distance.



*Tough Guys Don't Dance* is nevertheless thoroughly postmodern in its pastiche of cinematic genres and archetypes. The movie adaptation was a natural extension of a novel that was already conscious of cinematic as well as literary predecessors. And for all its interest in the “tough guy”, like so much of the postmodern *neo-noir* of the seventies and eighties, the novel is also interested in Hollywood’s classic *female* archetypes. The novel relies heavily on *noirish* traditions of the *femme fatale*, but also a wider American cultural opposition of the blonde and the brunette. The relevant pre-feminist archetypes here are Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), a film that Mailer admired as one of the early “classics of Camp”.<sup>30</sup> Marilyn was a representative twentieth century figure for Mailer exactly because of her understanding of sexual being as a kind of role play. The blonde, more than the fast-talking smarts of the loyal brunette, is the cultural embodiment of that idea. And in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, Mailer pushes the idea of the role-playing blonde beyond the coy sexuality of the musicals or the darker seductiveness of *noir* to a more pornified and violent register, one that isn’t just open to charges of sexism and misogyny but seems to openly invite them. Mailer’s primary interest here is in the fake blonde: “Any lady who chooses to become a blonde is truly a blonde” (18). Cinematic bloneness is not only about getting on in the world through sexual manipulation, but also the sexual allure of money in its own right. Its inauthenticity is itself also a form of tenacity.

The brunette is the opposing archetype in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*: The key character here is Madeleine, with whom Madden finds domestic bliss after she shoots Regency and thus resolves the panic plot. Madeleine was played in the movie by Isabella Rossellini, herself a member of European cinema aristocracy through her distinguished parents, but newly famous to American audiences owing to her career-defining role in *Blue Velvet* (yet another sign of Mailer’s indebtedness to that film). The casting of Isabella Rossellini with her art house credentials and European exoticism reprises the idea of brunette seriousness and blonde trashiness. But this contest between the brunette and the blonde also maps onto the film’s political geography. Madeleine’s





**Fig. 20. Isabella Rossellini, Ryan O'Neal and Deborah Sandlund as Patty Lareine, from *Tough Guys Don't Dance***

authenticity is vouched for by her Brooklyn-Italian roots, both East coast and European. Laureine and Jessica Pond's blonde inauthenticity by contrast suggests not only the classic duplicity of the *femme fatale*, but also the simulation and avarice of the eighties: Hollywood and the porn industry here meets Reaganite self-interest and Santa Barbara values. If the brunette is Eastern, perhaps even feminist, the blonde is Western or Southern. The artificiality of the blonde is central to the movie's backlash plot. The film's grisly joke on the subject is the severed heads of Pond and Lareine, which act as confused signifiers of femininity literally torn from the body. The duplicity of the *femme fatale* is through this violent twist planted on to the novel's interest in postmodern simulation and violence.

*Tough Guys'* appropriation of a style of writing and film-making of the forties is alive to more contemporary and technologised forms such as video, and in particular genres of the period such as the porn video and the video nasty. The film version explicitly alludes to *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, and to a modest degree is interested in slasher aesthetics. The detective tradition, once seen as a pulp commercial form, had by the 1980s a certain literary and cinematic respectability. *Tough Guys* rewrites this tradition with its sense of the trash aesthetics of contemporary commercial forms, which Mailer links to a distrust of the mediating technological eye of the "Sony video camera" (107). Allusions to visual forms such as photography, film, video, and TV commercials abound throughout the novel. There are three things to note here. First, these forms

are implicitly inimical to the kind of anecdotal storytelling the novel valorises, as embodied in Tim's father Dougy (who in this sense stands in for the disrupted "story" of unionism). Macho storytelling is contrasted with these trash forms. Second, it is clear that for Mailer the promise of an avant-garde impulse in camp has seemingly dissipated with the rise of these postmodern forms. Third, this is of interest because of the novel's representation of violence. If Mailer was having fun with violence in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, was he also concerned with how contemporary cinema and literature was treating the serious subject of violence as an aesthetic? In a review of Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991), among other things perhaps the definitive novel about the Reagan eighties, Mailer discussed this very subject:

The suspicion creeps in that much of what the author knows about violence does not come from the imagination (which in a great writer can need no more than the suspicion of real experience to give us the whole beast) but out of what he has picked up from *Son* and *Grandson* of *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and the rest of the filmic Jukes and Kallikaks. We are being give horror-shop plastic.<sup>31</sup>

Here Mailer seems to be criticising the very "horror-shop" aesthetics that he was deploying in his own eighties detective novel and its defiantly schlocky film adaptation. Part of this was generational: Mailer's review of *American Psycho* is strongly marked by competitive oedipal struggle with the younger writer. But there is also a sense in which Mailer is at odds here with the anti-realist attitude to violence in postmodern literature and film. Postmodern aesthetic violence, with its allusive relationship to cinematic history, was a curious return to *l'art pour l'art* in American film. *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, with its generic mixing of *noir*, Western and slasher aesthetics is clearly in this postmodern mould. While largely overlooked at the time, the film was admired by Quentin Tarantino, whose enormous influence as a director was down to his highly cinema literate blend of aestheticised violence with realistic pop-cultural dialogue.<sup>32</sup> Like *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, Tarantino's breakthrough film *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) was about men and violence, and men playing men (Tim Roth's character infiltrates the gang by

learning a script, which is also about learning the language and gestures of a certain kind of tough guy).

Despite Mailer's reservations, there are significant parallels between *Tough Guys Don't Dance* and *American Psycho*. Both are satires of the manners and greed of the Reagan years. Both novels illustrate this narrative with the dismemberment of female bodies, which in Ellis' case provoked a hostile response from women's groups. And, in post-AIDS and postmodernist terms, *American Psycho* reprises Mailer-esque themes such as violence and desensitisation. Yet Mailer saw *American Psycho* as an "ugly" and "deranging" (1077) work, and even expressed concerns as to the novel's representation of violence towards women. This is quite startling coming from the author of *An American Dream* and *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. The review, written just after the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the discourse of the "end of history," provides a useful gloss on Mailer's own fictional practice. But it is also a retrospective comment on the 1980s and on the spiritual function of art at a time of the apparent abandonment of political or religious faiths. He writes of this "book of horrors":

*American Psycho* is saying that the eighties were spiritually disgusting and the author's presentation is the crystallization of such horror. When an entire new class thrives on the ability to make money out of the manipulation of money, and becomes altogether obsessed with the surface of things—that is, with luxury commodities, food, and appearance—then, in effect, says Ellis, we have entered a period of the absolute manipulation of humans by humans: The objective correlative of total manipulation is coldcock murder. (1073)

While Mailer praises Ellis because "he has forced us to look at intolerable material" (1077), Mailer contends that Ellis' book finally fails as art because "by the end we know no more about Bateman's need to dismember others than we know about the inner workings in the mind of a wooden-faced actor who swings a broadax in an exploitation film" (1076). This is a misreading of Ellis' work, but interesting for the insight it offers into the aesthetics of Mailer's own fiction. Mailer bases his criticism on the novel's lack

of affect or depth psychology: *American Psycho* for him offers no insight into “extreme acts of violence” (1074), the “inner life of the murderer” or “real experience.” Because of his insistence on the real as a core aesthetic principle, however, Mailer distances himself from Ellis’ aesthetic strategies for grasping the manners and workings of a “society altogether obsessed with the surface of things” - that is, postmodern society’s free uninterrupted flow of consumable images and signs.

At its core, Mailer’s objection to *American Psycho* is principally an objection to the novel’s subjectivity. What confused many readers of *American Psycho*, in addition to its fractured narrative, was the sheer tedium of reading pages and pages of lists of commodities. There is a trace of this listing in *Tough Guys*, where Madden lists “Spider” Nissen’s “Honda 1200CC, his Trinitron TV, his Sony video camera, his Betamax recorder and his Apple computer” (107). *American Psycho* is an extreme and maximal form of this postmodern impulse to inventorise<sup>33</sup>, and it is this aesthetic extremity that qualitatively distinguishes it from Mailer’s contract whodunit. Patrick Bateman’s endless citations of consumer brands is not just a flirtation with the aesthetics of boredom or a display of narcissistic male vanity (though it is both these things). It is also an extreme form of commodity fetishism: Bateman’s habits of consumption alienate him not only from the system of global exchange that he, as a stockbroker, is materially involved in (expressed in the complicit contradiction between his faux-empathy for third-world suffering and the occasional racist murder), but also the very subjective coherence the products are expected to sustain. The cumulative effect of the torrent of blank names and brands is not to evoke desire for the goods in the reader; in fact, the residual glamour effect of Bateman’s status objects is nullified by their repetition. As Mailer notes, “we are being asphyxiated with state-of-the-art commodities” (1070). The commodity name here fails to signify not only the objects themselves, but also through pulverising excess and repetition the stable status identity Bateman would appear to covet. Ellis does not invite one to covet what Patrick Bateman has, because these things constitute what he repellently is.

*American Psycho* takes the violent proto-postmodernism of Mailer's *An American Dream* to an extreme moral and aesthetic conclusion. But what ethically repels Mailer about the novel is precisely that in doing so it abandons the sensuous real: in fiction, he writes, "the abstract ought to meet the particular" (1075). And it is this revolt against postmodern abstraction that motivates the aesthetics of Mailer's return to the sensual world, *Ancient Evenings*. The Egypt book is a novel of painstaking attention to the particular. The immersive first person narrative of *Ancient Evenings* is in one sense radically solipsistic in the manner of other modernist experiments of the twentieth century, and to this one can add the *historical* solipsism of setting the novel in an alien past. But the rebirthing consciousness of Menenhetet II is a consciousness immersed in physical suffering. Here solipsism opens itself out to the universal:

Crude thoughts and fierce forces are my state. I do not know  
who I am. Nor what I was. I cannot hear a sound. Pain is near  
that will be like no pain felt before.

Is this the fear that holds the universe? Is pain the fundament?  
All the rivers veins of pain? [...] Is one human? Or merely alive? Like a blade of grass equal to  
all existence the moment it is torn? Yes. If pain is fundament,  
then a blade of grass can know all there is.<sup>34</sup>

The democratic ecstasies of Walt Whitman are inverted here in a minimal, stripped back narrative voice. This is Adorno's modernist negativity *par excellence*: a fragment of consciousness, a "blade of grass", both *negates* the historical reality of human suffering and *universalises* it in an ahistorical register. *Ancient Evenings* is a non-allegorical tale of power, violence and clashing and wounded gods whose very pre-modernity conjures up twentieth century horror and violence.

Mailer's attitude to the particular and the universal can be usefully thought of in Adorno's terms.<sup>35</sup> The key notion here is what Adorno calls nonidentity. For Adorno, the categorical impulses of the Enlightenment have historically operated to gather the particular, nonidentical elements of the natural world into concepts. The name Adorno gives to this process of identification is domination (Adorno here is very close to

Mailer's vision of totalitarian abstraction in the modern). Adorno's negative dialectics have certain environmentalist implications that are pertinent to *Ancient Evenings* and its poetics of excess. The novel's emphasis on the natural world, on the body and its waste products, on the magical and erotic, corresponds to this nonidentical world that Fredric Jameson in his book on Adorno calls "heterogeneity, otherness, the qualitative, the radically new, the corporeal".<sup>36</sup> These are, in effect, the modernist values Mailer had first explored in "The Metaphysics of the Belly". By turning to the preconceptual world, *Ancient Evenings* tries to render in fiction an imaginative space of radical nonidentity that is a negative image of the world of abstract and murderous exchange value that is presented in postmodern fictions like *American Psycho*.

Also at play here is *Ancient Evenings*' magical consciousness. Mailer claimed that the Egyptian world was "one of the places where magic was being converted into social equivalence".<sup>37</sup> Mailer explores the porous borders of Menenhetet's identity through a series of narrative devices including magic, reincarnation and telepathy. It is through these devices that the narrator navigates the breadth of Egyptian civilization. Menenhetet's consciousness is absorbed in the sensual world of the Nile. The power of the scent of the river, as that of the book's lists of exotic spices, evokes not only polymorphous desire but also the interconnectedness of the Egyptian lifeworld: its palaces, brothels, slave quarters, temples, and markets. The libidinal and alimentary rhythms of the body reflect the inflows and outflows of commodities and armies along the Nile, connecting Egyptian experience to neighboring cultures and races (Hittite, Nubian) within the reach of its empire, just as the river Liffey in Joyce's Dublin reflects that city's colonial position.

The metaphor of the river as a connecting nexus of empire and capital flows is not gratuitous. The first seeds of the Egyptian novel were sown in a description of the Potomac river in *Armies of the Night*:

Then his thoughts began to meander again - down a long broad slow river of thought. He turned a bend - he had it. Delight. He had made the grand connection between Egyptian



architecture and the Pentagon. Yes. The Egyptian forms, slab-like, excremental, thick walls, secret caverns, had come from the mud of the Nile, mud was the medium out of which the Egyptians built their civilization, abstract ubiquitous mud equaled in modern times only by abstract ubiquitous money, filthy lucre (thoughts of Norman O. Brown). And American Civilization had moved from the existential sanction of the frontier to the abstract ubiquitous sanction of the dollar bill. Nowhere had so much of the dollar bill collected as at the Pentagon, giant mudpie on the banks of America's Nile, our Potomac!<sup>38</sup>

*Ancient Evenings* is not however an allegory of American empire or American capital.<sup>39</sup>

What Mailer is trying to explore is an alternative economy embedded in magical libidinal exchange. In this sense Godden is right to say that this marks *Ancient Evenings* as a work of the seventies, the decade of the oil crisis and the decisive decade in the shift to postmodern late capital. As the theorist Mark Fisher argues, the early seventies, when *Ancient Evenings* first began to gestate, was also the era of Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* and Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus*.<sup>40</sup> In this sense *Ancient Evenings* is after all a "fiction of capital" that emerges just at the point where the project of a total cognitive mapping of *American* society seemed unavailable to Mailer. But such a reading not only does not justice to *Ancient Evenings*'s own aesthetic particularity, it also fails to account for its negative dialectics.



**Fig. 21. Production still from *River of Fundament***



**Fig. 22. Production still from *River of Fundament***

In this last chapter, we have seen how two of Mailer's fictions of the nineteen eighties offer a late variation of the tensions that have been the subject of this thesis. *Ancient Evenings* is Mailer's most thoroughly modernist experiment: the dominant themes of his fiction are explored in this book in a concentrated and alienated form. The book is sometimes a victim of the formlessness of its architecture, and is one of the oddest bestsellers in literary history. But while it seemed a strange fit at the high period of postmodern fiction, it has since been a direct influence on experimental works such as William Burroughs' *The Western Lands* (1987) and most extraordinarily Matthew Barney's free art-film adaptation *River of Fundament* (2014). Barney's work takes place at Mailer's (fictional) wake in a floating recreation of his Brooklyn home. The river journey toward the Brooklyn Bridge is the setting for three successive reincarnations of Mailer's creative spirit (physically embodied by a Chrysler, Pontiac and a Ford) as it moves towards immortality. *Ancient Evenings* has had a strange creative afterlife.

But where does that leave us with the pulp fiction of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*? Adorno famously described modernism and mass culture as "torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up"<sup>42</sup> and it has indeed been useful to see *Ancient Evenings* and *Tough Guys Don't Dance* as a late, postmodern variation on that theme. The point, here and throughout this study, has not been to make the case of modernism over postmodernism (or *vice versa*). Rather, the key questions have been: how might we find new ways of connecting Mailer to the wider currents of postwar art and literature?



What is distinctive about the particular aesthetic forms that Mailer creates in response? What is the relationship of these forms to the broader *historical* patterns that his work engages with? And finally, in what ways do these forms constitute an attempt to capture the shifting question of the real? Taken as an imperfect whole, Mailer's works of the eighties do help us to trace the moves in the game that are involved in these movements.

1. *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, 300-301.
2. Leigh 155.
3. Godden 215.
4. Leigh 173.
5. Huyssen 171.
6. *Pieces and Pontifications*, 189.
7. One of the revelations of J Michael Lennon's 2013 biography is the extent to which Mailer's aesthetic decisions were determined by financial necessity.
8. Glenday 126.
9. Quotation from People review, dust jacket of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (New York: Ballantine, 1985). Subsequent citations refer to this edition, and are bracketed in the text. This chapter also references Mailer's film version of the novel. *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, dir. Norman Mailer, perf. Lawrence Tierney, Ryan O'Neal, Isabella Rossellini. *Cannon Films*, 1987.
10. *Pieces and Pontifications*, 133.
11. *Ancient Evenings* and *Tough Guys Don't Dance* make an interesting case study of Jameson's identification of a transition to modernist authorship (individual style open to parody) to blank postmodern pastiche (*Postmodernism*, 16-19). For Jameson on 1980s cinema and its relation to the historical imagination, see *Postmodernism*, 293-296.
12. Manso, *Mailer: His Life and Times*, 166.
13. "Provincetown lives at a bemused distance from the rest of the country. It does not quite consider itself American". Michael Cunningham, *Land's End: A Walk through Provincetown* (London: Vintage, 2004), 71.
14. Quoted in Manso, *Mailer: His Life and Times*, 525.
15. "Real Man" is the name of Angelo Baadelamenti's synth rock theme song to the film.

16. David Savran, *Taking It Like A Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 68.
17. While Dougy is not exactly an author surrogate, Mailer's fascination with cancer as a disease caused by the "rebellion of the cells" against repetition and conformity is relevant here. Masculine activity as well as creative rebellion are two solutions that Mailer offers to this. Cancer is both a productive metaphor and an idea that Mailer takes quite literally. Ideas of illness and weakness are here attached to ideas about masculinity, death and "punking" which are played out in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. But it's notable that for Dougy the emergence of AIDS modifies, and even mollifies, these macho anxieties. Susan Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor* and *AIDS and its Metaphors* are both intriguing counter-texts to *Tough Guys Don't Dance*'s metaphorical uses of illness. Sontag's attitude to illness is "against interpretation".
18. "Why Norman Mailer Won't Dance", interview with Brandon Judell, *The Advocate*, 27 October 1987: 54-55.
19. Gay panic is a central theme of both novel and film. In the novel, Madden specifically recalls attacks of "homosexual panic" in his past, citing the Freudian genesis of that idea (100). Madden links that episode of homosexual panic to his new tattoo and his period of memory loss.
20. See Savran 197-199. For more on the eighties backlash and feminism, see Susan Faludi, *Backlash: the Undeclared War Against Women* (London: Vintage, 1992).
21. Savran 5.
22. "The law itself needs its obscene supplement, it is sustained by it." Slavoj Žižek, "Ego Ideal and the Superego: Lacan as a viewer of *Casablanca*", *lacan.com*, 4 May 2009. Web. 13 April 2015.
23. Peter Manso, *Ptown: Art, Sex, and Money on the Outer Cape* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 258.
24. Quoted in Lennon 587.
25. See "The Karma of Words", interview with John Whalen-Bridge, *Journal of Modern Literature* 30 (2006): 13.
26. *The Essential Mailer*, 362.
27. Sontag, *Against Interpretation*, 277-278. Justin Bozung thinks of *Tough Guy's Don't Dance* as a work about the *theatrum mundi*, the idea of world as stage. Personal correspondence.
28. Waters discusses his friendship with Mailer in Bennett Marcus, "Maya Angelou Is 'Still at Odds' with Norman Mailer", *Vanity Fair* 18 October 2013. Web. 13 April 2015.
29. See Simpson's book *Male Impersonators: Men Performing Masculinity* for more on the cinematic aestheticisation of the male body. In his introduction, Simpson calls Mailer

himself a “male impersonator” (15).

30. Norman Mailer, *Marilyn* (1973; London: Chancellor, 1992), 106.

31. *The Time of Our Time* (London: Abacus, 1998), 1075. Subsequent citations are bracketed in the text.

32. Justin Bozung has kindly shared information with me about Tarantino’s interest in *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*. According to Tarantino himself, Mailer gave advice to Tarantino about casting Lawrence Tierney in *Reservoir Dogs*. See also Josh Becker, “Quentin Tarantino Interview: On the Set of *Reservoir Dogs*” (1992) *beckerfilms.com*. Web. 28 December 2015.

33. John Frow identifies this impulse to list as characteristic of the postmodern. See his *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays in Cultural Theory and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 27-28.

34. *Ancient Evenings* (London: Picador, 1984), 3.

35. Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is the key source here, but these ideas run throughout Adorno’s work. I have also drawn here on his *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Athlone Press, 1999) and Fredric Jameson’s *Late Marxism: Adorno, Or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990).

36. *Late Marxism*, 23.

37. Qtd. in Leigh 168.

38. *Armies of the Night*, 179-180.

39. Harold Bloom has noted in the Egypt book a “relevance to current reality in America”. See “Norman in Egypt”, *New York Review of Books* 28 April 1983: 3. Political parallels have been also noted in the novel. In conversation with John Whalen-Bridge, Mailer conceded that he did have President Carter in mind for his characterisation of Rameses IX. John Whalen-Bridge, personal e-mail, 2 July 2004. However, I do not see *Ancient Evenings* as primarily allegorical.

40. Fisher, writing as *k-punk*, links Margaret Atwood’s 1972 novel *Surfacing* to a series of “libidinal” feminist and anti-capitalist theoretical texts, primarily *Anti-Oedipus*. See “How the Other Half Doesn’t Live”, *k-punk*, 20 September 2009. Web. 29 July 2015.

41. Quoted by J.M. Bernstein in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (London: Routledge, 1991), 2.

## Conclusion

In the same year as the review of *American Psycho*, Mailer published the most ambitious of his late works, *Harlot's Ghost* (1991). The book is a vast 1300 page mapping of Cold War history through the prism of the CIA, in Mailer's version a paranoid-cynical global surveillance network. As the Cold War was concluding, Mailer was for the first time turning his attention to the fully global implications of American empire. The novel is not an Arabian Nights of the atomic age in the way *Gravity's Rainbow* is, with its commitment to deep fabulistic storytelling, but an essentially realist attempt at counter-history grounded in traditional character and manners (the model for the spy novel was Balzac's *A Harlot High and Low*). Yet in its maximalism and its resistance to historical closure, *Harlot's Ghost* was the closest that Mailer ever got to a true postmodern systems novel. The novel's encyclopaedic plan remained ultimately unfinished: the book ends at the moment of the Kennedy assassination with the words "To Be Continued". Mailer never followed through with a proposed sequel, but perhaps this is symptomatic of a traumatic *failure to complete*, to totalise history into a single vision.

The contemporary American novelist whose work Mailer felt the most affinity for in this period was Don DeLillo, who was exploring a similar paranoid historiography in his novels *Libra* (1988) and *Underworld* (1997).<sup>1</sup> Yet as we saw in the introduction, by the nineties a later generation of postmodernists raised on popular culture were beginning to explore a very different worldview from those writers who came to prominence during the Cold War. The reaction against what was perceived as the imperial overreach and masculine egoism of Mailer's generation was also attached to a scepticism about realism in fiction. Since then, realism has made something of a comeback in the Anglophone novel. Jonathan Franzen is the American writer who has made the most persuasive artistic case for realism as a form adequate to postmodern reality in fictions such as *The Corrections* (2001) and *Freedom* (2010). The cultural battle between postmodern and realism in the novel survives even in the internet age, when the novel

as a vehicle for habits of concentration seems even more under pressure than it was in the McLuhan televisual era of the sixties when Mailer was in the ascendant.<sup>2</sup> The ideal and even the form of the Great American Novel has proved remarkably resilient even in the twenty first century, even as it has continued to prove a politically and artistically disputed standard.

The fact that Mailer gambled so much on the notion of the Great American Novel is so infamous that it sometimes obscures the kinds of books he actually did write. This is not to say that Mailer didn't write significant fictions and non-fictions. It's simply to ask what's at stake when we hold up "the" Great American Novel as a yardstick for aesthetic success or interest. Mailer's pursuit of cognitive mapping sometimes expressed itself in an impulse to totalise American experience which is very close to the classic ambitions of the Great American Novel. This ambition drove Mailer's creativity in ways that were often productive and formally arresting, and sometimes destructive of that very creativity and its forms. This study has tried to make a different, more "materialist" aesthetic case for Mailer. His body of work wrestles with a distinct set of formal and historical tensions and pressures: primarily, this was grounded in an eclectic engagement with the problems of modernism and, increasingly, postmodernism. Yet this formal eclecticism centred around one artistic problem, the nature of the real itself. This, as we have seen, was a central representational problem for postwar fiction in general. If, as Mailer wrote in 1952 in "The Man Who Studied Yoga", "reality is no longer realistic"<sup>3</sup>, how could fiction hope to adequate to that new reality?

Mailer's response was to attempt to confront American technological society full on while not ceding to absurdity. In opposition to the postmodern novel, he sought to preserve a humanistic commitment to fiction and its distinctive modes of subjective exploration. Yet he was no simple reactionary counter-modernist, despite his jeremiads against television and modernist architecture. Here Mailer's famous political left-conservatism should also be read as a *formal* tension playing itself out in his work, which swerves between avant-garde and traditional aesthetics sometimes within books, and

sometimes between them.<sup>4</sup> The early naturalism of *The Naked and the Dead* was followed by the contracted basement surrealism of *Barbary Shore*; the innovations in the non-fiction novel were accompanied by the more expulsive pop-surrealism of *An American Dream*. That Mailer had difficulties with the form of the novel is beyond dispute, but there is an argument for his more formally restless and imperfect fictions. Jonathan Lethem wrote about Mailer that “If, as in the Isaiah Berlin formulation, ‘the fox knows many little things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing,’ then Mailer’s gift and curse was to have been a hedgehog trapped inside an exploding fox”.<sup>5</sup> Lethem seems to have wanted Mailer to have been a hedgehog: this study makes a case for the shape-shifting modernist fox.

This modernist eclecticism was tied to a romantic ideal of artistic creativity, whose avatar was Picasso. It was this modernist mythology of originality and authorial style that was beginning to be questioned in the sixties, and which postmodernism would ultimately attempt to deconstruct. While Mailer was artistically conscious of this problem of authorship, especially in his late sixties cinema, he never experimented with Burroughsian cut ups and other avant-garde techniques such as Kathy Acker’s plagiarisms of American fiction in *In Memoriam to Identity* (1990). The author *as subject* is always an organising presence in his books in ways that are not restricted to, or even best represented by, his most self-advertising books. The best aesthetic example is the minimalist *The Executioner’s Song*, where the author is the almost invisible god who acts as a silent arranger.

Beyond the familiar battles over the fate of the American novel, this study also opens up Mailer to a much broader history of twentieth century aesthetics. His creativity almost from the very first was connected to modernist visual culture, sometimes directly but more often in that he found wide-ranging analogies for literary form in art. The postmodernism-realism debate in postwar fiction (still alive in the twenty first century) connects unexpectedly in Mailer to the “return of the real” in art and critical theory.<sup>6</sup> Here, I have seen Mailer’s aesthetics in relationship to psychoanalytical views on trauma

and violence; anti-idealist philosophy in Bataille and Adorno; and later postmodern art historical engagements with realism and simulation. Furthermore, Mailer's interest in narcissism was also connected to a history of avant-garde interventions in literature, film, photography and art.

Mailer's most significant influence on recent postmodernism was not in the novel but in the field of visual and performance art. As we saw in earlier chapters, in *Cremaster 2* (1999) Matthew Barney explores through the prism of Mailer's texts ideas about technology and posthuman sexuality: the hive of masculinity here becomes a metaphor for social control. In the five hour *River of Fundament* (2014), the debt is even more radical. The film is a peculiar parody of Mailer's Hemingway haunted creative struggle with the Great American Novel, where Mailer's literal death becomes a figure for posthuman metamorphosis. We have here come full circle. In chapter 1, we tracked Mailer's preoccupation with the form of the American automobile in "A Note on Comparative Pornography" to a similar formal interest in the car in Pop Art. In Barney, the automobile becomes a vehicle (a literal sarcophagus) for the iterations of Mailer's own creative mythology, or for artistic self-bearing itself.

The feminist charge against Mailer, that his version of modernist creativity was essentially phallocentric, remains pertinent. Yet from a historical perspective Mailer seems closer to a certain romantic and mythic strand of second wave feminism than he did at the time. Writers like Camille Paglia and Germaine Greer are controversial even within feminism, then as now, but they shared with Mailer a libertarianism tied to a certain kind of self-reliant radicalism, a post-Freudian freedom in writing about the body and the darker aspects of gender and subjectivity, and a belief in literary culture as a repository of lore and cultural values *as well as* cultural critique. The fate of all these elements in our contemporary culture within and without feminism can't be adequately summarised here, but what I have tried to do here is not so much recoup Mailer for these arguments as productively resituate them. In particular, his preoccupation with masculinity as a subject seems to me closely tied to an era where the assumptions



about gender that were implicit in literary fiction were beginning to come out into the open and become *self-aware* and thus politicised. Mailer's work was part of that political critique of American masculinity, yet at the same time he wanted to preserve modernist masculinity as a value. This was a tension in Mailer's work that the best feminist criticism put under critical pressure, and it is still interesting to view his work partly through that feminist lens.

Yet ultimately narcissism in Mailer was always a return to subjectivity itself, in ways that go considerably beyond simple self-conscious display or male egoism. To conclude, we will explore one last aspect of Mailer's interest in twentieth century subjectivity: violence. The creative-destructive processes of narcissism, so central to Freud's account of the psyche, are in Mailer translated into a fictional preoccupation with good and evil. These theological concerns emerge at the culmination of his review of *American Psycho*:

the real intellectual damage this novel may cause is that it will reinforce Hannah Arendt's thesis on the banality of evil. It is the banality of Patrick Bateman that creates his hold over the reader and gives this ugly work its force. For if Hannah Arendt is correct and evil is banal, then that is vastly worse than the opposed possibility that evil is satanic. The extension of Arendt's thesis is that we are absurd, and God and the Devil do not wage war with each other over the human outcome. I would rather believe that the Holocaust was the worst defeat God ever suffered at the hands of the Devil. That thought offers more life than to assume that many of us are nothing but dangerous, distorted, and no damn good.<sup>7</sup>

Mailer said elsewhere that the notion of the banality of evil was entirely inadequate to explain the horrors of Nazism.<sup>8</sup> His final novel, *The Castle in the Forest* (2007), is about Hitler's early years and was a last attempt at wrestling with this subject of the cannibal and the christian self.<sup>9</sup> The novel is narrated by D.T., an assistant to the devil, a device that owes something both to Milton and to C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*. The problem of evil was for Mailer an enduring theological concern, and it was directly connected to the experience of the Holocaust. The last pages of *The Castle in the Forest*,



and thus of Mailer's fiction, fittingly take place in a concentration camp.

But was Mailer right about evil and violence? Freud suggested that our theological notions about good and evil are banally grounded in the family romance rather than any primordial daemonism, while Arendt's much-contested thesis saw evil in the form of Adolf Eichmann as linked to impersonal bureaucratisation. Mailer was always critical of Arendt, and while he shared Freud's belief in an ineradicable tragic destructiveness in human nature, he was opposed to Freud's scientific rationalism. He saw the essential struggle between good and evil as actively playing itself out in human history, and he thought that the liberal-scientific denial of evil as a *core* aspect of human subjectivity, rather than randomly distributed in clinical psychopaths, was at heart a denial of the complex and terrifying reality of human subjectivity itself. It was this denial that Mailer saw as absurd.

But Mailer didn't want to simply confront the primitive core of subjectivity, he also wanted to *liberate* it. The destructive narcissism of the Freudian unconscious is, in Mailer, at uneasy war with an idealised Rousseauism. In effect, Mailer made a wager on the creative-destructive potential of human nature: if narcissism lies at the heart of human subjectivity, then Mailer gambles that "man is roughly more good than evil"<sup>10</sup>, and that was for society and culture a risk worth taking. This was a Dostoevskyan gamble which possibly played a role in the stabbing of Adele Mailer, and certainly contributed to his disastrous role in the release of the killer Jack Henry Abbott, who killed a young Cuban waiter weeks after his release. Mailer's contribution to Abbott's release was minimal and often overstated, but he certainly endorsed him as a writer and vouched for him as a character witness.<sup>11</sup> By backing the writer rather than the killer in Abbott, Mailer made a tragic personal and intellectual misjudgement (he never seems to have seriously considered the possibility that Abbott was "no damn good").

A more recent challenge to Mailer's vision of twentieth century violence is Steven Pinker's controversial book *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011). Pinker's thesis, supported by massive quantities of statistical data, is that there has been an

extraordinary historical *decline* in violence over recent centuries. Pinker's claims have been vigorously contested<sup>12</sup>, but if true don't they present a fundamental challenge to the core assumptions that Mailer makes about violence and (post)modernity? One counter-argument is that Mailer's concern was not with violence *per se* but with the twentieth century's abstract violence, the distancing between agent and act in the era of the nuclear bomb. Pinker's argument is also itself based on a classically liberal assurance about human nature and progress of which Mailer was suspicious. This is not in itself a definitive argument against Pinker (who in other contexts does posit a Hobbesian strain in human nature), but it does help us to place Mailer's within a broader series of historical arguments that are still relevant to our culture, and have in recent years re-emerged in debates about atheism and fundamentalism. In a response to those debates, Terry Eagleton draws a useful distinction between atheist liberal humanism and a more radical tragic humanism, which "shares liberal humanism's vision of the free flourishing of humanity, but holds that attaining it is possible only by confronting the very worst".<sup>13</sup> Mailer's view was that the tragic view of human experience offers at least a vision of life that does not reduce to banalisation or systematisation. His claim that there is no brushing away the capacity for human destructiveness remains a vital if troubling proposition both in its own historical situation and in our own. For all his frailties and blind spots, his best books offer an ethical exploration of human "potentialities" in all their messy complexity.

1. *Selected Letters of Norman Mailer*, ed. J. Michael Lennon (New York: Random House, 2015), 623, 682.

2. Jonathan Franzen explores these "apocalyptic" pressures on the American novel in the internet age in *The Kraus Project: Essays By Karl Kraus* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014), especially 273-277 where he argues that in accelerated modernity the "experience of each succeeding generation is so different from the previous one that there will always

be people to whom it seems that the key values have been lost and there can be no more posterity". For Franzen, the Austrian essayist Karl Kraus was one of the first to identify what Franzen ironically calls this "unchanging modality of modernity" (277). Aside from the question of Mailer's relationship to posterity (whether his books will be read is outside the scope of this study), his dramatic relationship to the sixties and the novel in the McLuhan age is one such apocalyptic encounter with new media.

3. *Advertisements for Myself*, 166.

4. Diana Trilling, the establishment New York critic who was one of Mailer's primary champions, said that "I do think of him as a traditional writer in a very strange way. I don't think many people would perhaps agree with that. But I do still think that – his language for instance, is very traditional. And the sense of pressure in his prose does not change that. It's a traditional style put under terrific strain by contemporaneity". *Norman Mailer's USA*. What is interesting here is the assumption that most other critics would regard Mailer as one of the radical new mutants of the avant-garde. That assumption is no longer made; arguably, those assumptions have reversed.

5. *Advertisements for Norman Mailer*. For all his postmodern self-consciousness, Lethem's essay is essentially an argument about the hedgehog form of the Great American Novel. While later postmodernists were suspicious of the male tussling over the novel that characterised Mailer's generation, it seems to me that the recent debates about the novel continue to be inflected by the spectre of the GAN. Yet as feminists and others have continued to point out, that aesthetic standard tends to leave other stories and trajectories in American writing in a secondary position.

6. David Shields has also in this decade outlined what he calls a tendency to "reality hunger", of which the partial return to realism in the novel is a symptom rather than a solution. Shields, whose manifesto challenges claims of traditional realism and the "novel" as a narrative form, sees this reality hunger in recent trends towards invented memoir, documentary film and reality television. His own aphoristic manifesto consists of plagiarisms of other texts about reality and realism in American fiction. The manifesto's opening statement does seem to be his "own": "Every artistic movement from the beginning of time is an attempt to figure out a way to smuggle more of what the artist thinks is reality into the work of art". *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* (London: Penguin, 2010), 3. The New Journalism's blending of fact with fictional techniques anticipates some of these developments, as does Mailer's "smuggling" of fragments of the real in the found objects of *The Executioner's Song*. Yet Shields specifically rejects the formal exhaustiveness of the classic novel as an aesthetic.

7. *The Time of Our Time*, 1077.

8. *The Spooky Art*, 150-151.

9. J.M. Coetzee's review of *Castle in the Forest* examines its "infernal-banal" themes. "Portrait of the Monster as a Young Artist." *The New York Review of Books* 15 February 2007. There was a distinct theological turn to Mailer's late fiction. He explores the "christian" side of the equation in *The Gospel According to the Son* (1997).

10.     *Advertisements for Myself*, 294.
11.     See the account of the Abbot affair in Lennon 551-566.
12.     John Gray has been a particularly vocal opponent of Pinker, and in books like *Straw Dogs* (2002) of scientific progressivism more generally. See “John Gray: Steven Pinker is wrong about violence and war”, *The Guardian* 13 March 2015. Web. 9 January 2016.
13.     Terry Eagleton, “Culture & Barbarism: Metaphysics in a Time of Terrorism.” *Commonweal* 23 Mar. 2009. The very last book Mailer published when he was alive was in part an intervention in the debates about the new atheism: *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* (2007).



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## Appendix

As per the regulatory standards for the format and binding of a thesis, I here include previously published papers. I am the sole author of these papers. Where relevant, I have contacted the publishers and copyright holders for permission to include them here.

A version of chapter 1 was published as “Norman Mailer and Pop: Totalitarianism and mass culture in *The Naked and the Dead*” in *U.S. Studies Online: The BAAS Postgraduate Journal*, issue 3 Spring 2003. This is a web article that is still available online at the time of submission.

Two versions of chapter 8 have been published elsewhere. A substantially edited version of this chapter was published as “The Addiction of Masculinity: *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* and the Cultural Politics of Reaganism” in *Journal of Modern Literature* 30.1 (2006): 23-30.

A revised version was also published as “From Egypt to Provincetown, By Trump Air: Modernist History and the Return of the Repressed in *Ancient Evenings* and *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*” in *Norman Mailer’s Later Fictions: Ancient Evenings Through Castle in the Forest*, ed. John Whalen-Bridge (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 15-33.